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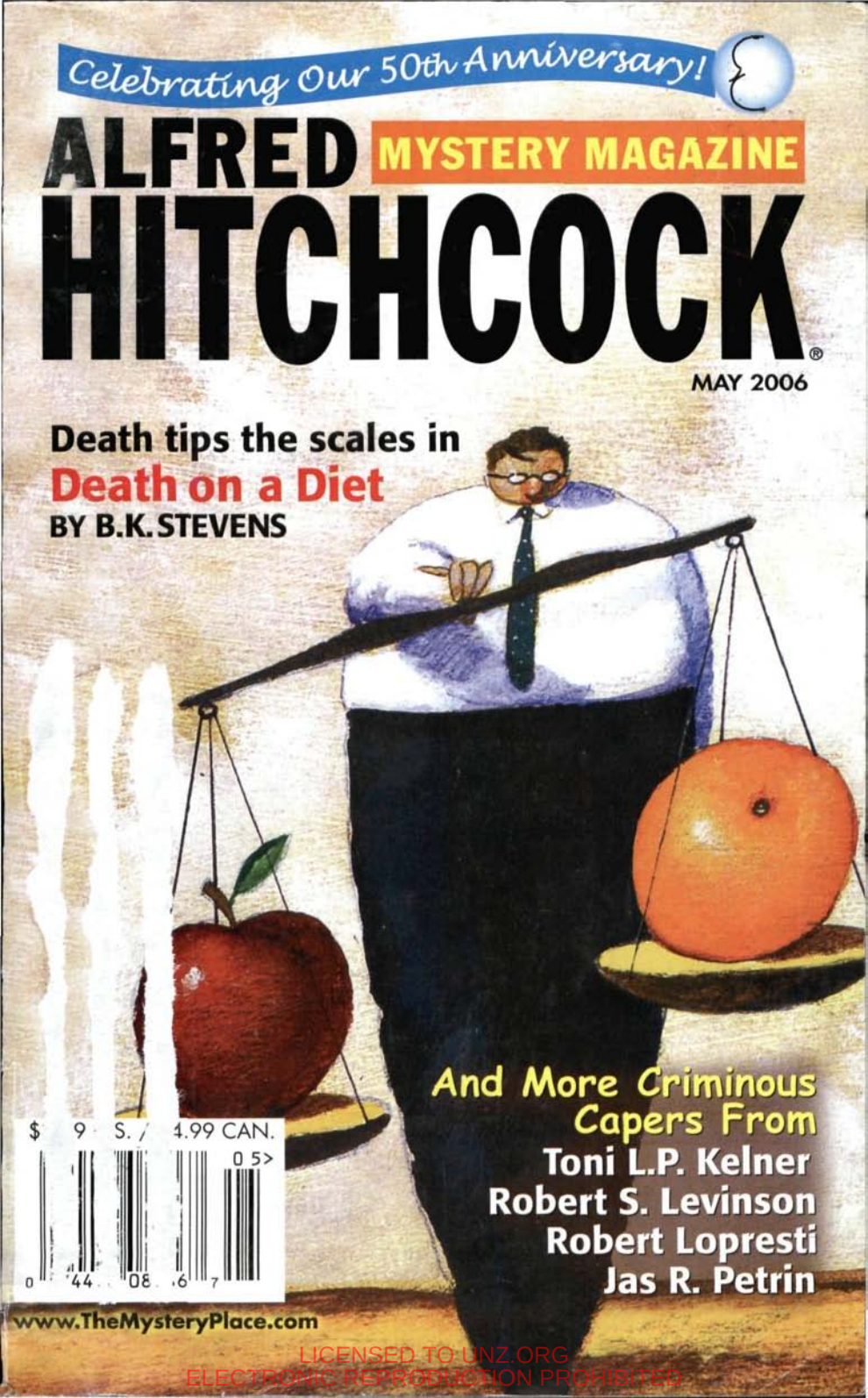

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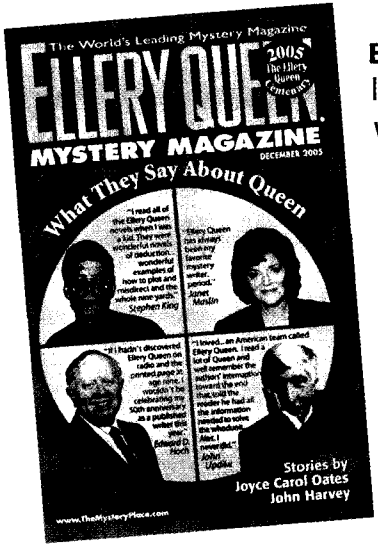


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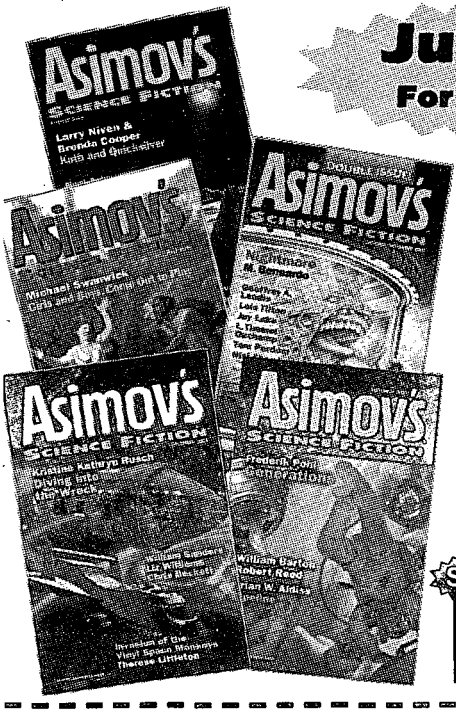


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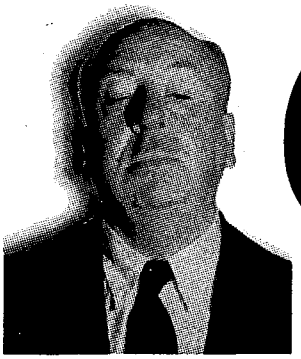

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

## THE QUIRKY, THE SHADY, AND THE DEAD

The stories in our fourth annual humor issue derive their comedy more from character than they do from pratfalls. In our cover story, B. K. Stevens brings back Leah Abrams, a perceptive academic who chronicles workplace communications—and unintentionally, workplace crime—in her daily journal while she temps. In "Death on a Diet," Leah goes to work for a diet guru who is somewhat less than she appears. Micky Cardex, Michelle Knowlden's ever ailing sleuth in "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern," returns to AHMM this issue, and she is ever on the alert for clues, despite the ravages of her alphabetical immune disorder. A starlet's attention to a young fan in Robert S. Levinson's story "All I Ever Wanted To Be" leads to unexpected consequences. In "The Sword of the Barbarian," Wes Goodhill and his bride Casey find themselves in possession of a classic pulp fiction cover painting. The question of whether it is a forgery or a stolen original seems irrelevant when some goons come looking for it. Mystery writer Leopold Longshanks is roused in the middle of the night by the police when crime cracks the serenity of his neighborhood. His car was just one of many that have been "prowled" in "Shanks on the Prowl" by Robert Lopresti.

We welcome two new authors this month. Toni L. P. Kelner ("Sleeping with the Plush") is no stranger to mystery readers. Her North Carolina–set Laura Fleming series has seen eight outings since 1993; *Wed and Buried* came out in 2004. In the meantime, Ms. Kelner has started a new series centering around Tilda Harper, a freelance entertainment reporter who specializes in tracking down forgotten celebrities for "Where are they now?" articles. Look for *Without Mercy* when it comes out next year from Five Star.

Rachel Dunstan Muller ("The Cart Thief") is a technical writer living on Vancouver Island, which she describes as a "nature lover's paradise." Although she's published two science fiction stories, this is her first published mystery story. She does have a book in the works, though: *The Wishing Box*, a YA mystery, will be published by Orca Book Publishers in 2007.

Another Canadian, Jas. R. Petrin, long-known to AHMM readers, kindly submitted to our questions, which you can read in the Conversation following his story "Peewee and the Gewgaw."



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# SLEEPING WITH THE PLUSH

## TONI L. P. KELNER

If I had a dollar bill for every time I've slept with the plush, by now I'd be sleeping in the finest motor home ever made. Another man might put that kind of money into the bank or a house, but not me. I'm a carny, through and through, and have been for over forty years, ever since I slept with the plush for the first time one early summer night back in '67. It wasn't the sleeping that changed me, of course. It was the murder.

Not that I was anticipating my life's work that night, mind you. I was too busy being steamed.

"Kid, there's not a carny on this lot who's hasn't slept with the plush one time or another," Squeezebox Sam said as she spread a sheet over the pile of stuffed plush bears, snakes, turtles, and poodles she'd carefully arranged on the canvas floor of the duck pond tent. "Anybody who says different is lying."

"Yeah? Then why did Gary laugh his ass off when he heard about it?"

"Because Gary is an asshole. Don't you know what everybody calls him?"

"What?"

"We call him Gary."

"That's his name, isn't it?"

"Have you ever met a carny—a real carny—without a nickname?"

Now that she mentioned it, Gary was the only one on the lot who didn't go by a nickname, except Brownie Fenton's wife and his daughter Lorinda, and nobody could deny that the owner's wife and kid were real carnies.

"We don't waste nicknames on people unless we think they're going to stick around," Squeezebox said. "Next time Gary gives you any shit, ask him how long it took to clean the barf off the



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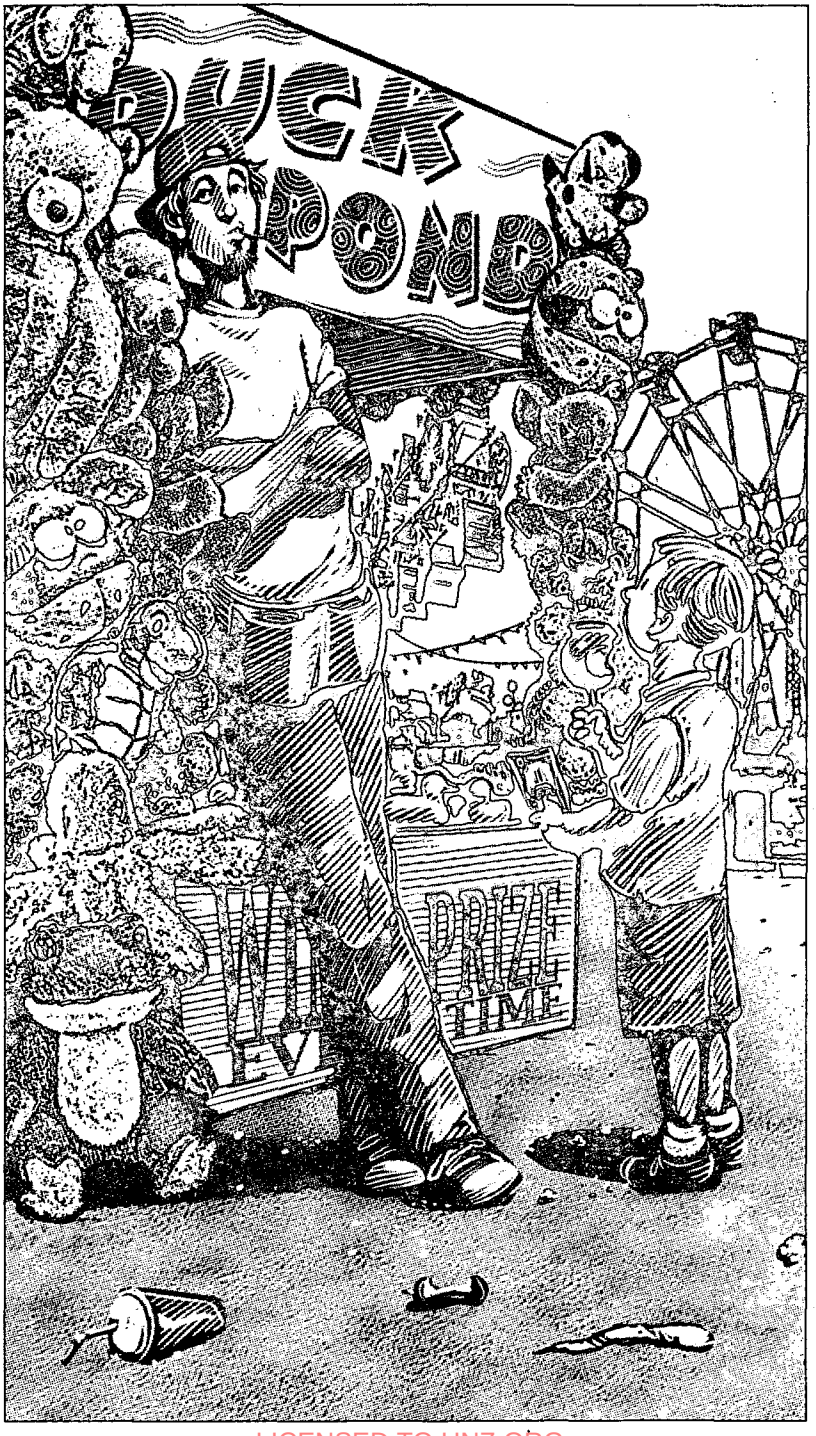


Tim Foley

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Octopus after letting a townie ride when his face was puke green."

Though I was glad to store that fact up for later appreciation, I still felt like a jerk. "He's rolling in the dough now, and he's not even that good an agent. I can build a tip better than he can—if Brownie would give me a decent alibi joint like the swinger or the nail store, I'd bring in twice what Gary does. But no, he's got to give me the damned duck pond." I kicked at the stainless steel "pond" in disgust.

"Kid, Brownie Fenton has been with it since before you were born. He knows what he's doing. Every agent starts with the hanky panks—when you're good enough, he'll move you up to an alibi. Now quit kicking the pond, unless you want it to start leaking. If you think sleeping on plush is bad, try sleeping on wet plush!" She tossed a worn blue blanket onto the bed she'd made. "Now give that a try and tell me it isn't a whole lot better than spending your money on the bunkhouse or a motel."

I gingerly lowered myself onto the pile of stuffed animals and wiggled around a little. "It's not so bad," I had to admit. "Thanks, Squeezebox—I owe you one."

"Damned straight you do, and you're going to owe me another one come tomorrow. When you bring me back my sheet and blanket, I'm going to teach you a few tricks that'll put some cash in your grouch bag."

"Yeah, sure," I said, not feeling particularly grateful as the stout woman headed out. What did she know about being an agent anyway? She and her partner Junebug had themselves a sweet setup, selling lemonade and foot-long hot dogs to the townies at their grab joint, and their Coachman trailer was as big as some apartments. She didn't have to shout "Everybody's a winner" all night long, trying to get lot lice to lift ducks, and she sure as hell wasn't going to be sleeping with the plush anytime soon.

Was it my fault that my first job on the job was the night of that podunk town's Little League championship, meaning that everybody with kids was at the damned game? Even the best agent couldn't get a grown man, or even a teenager, to plunk down a quarter to look at a duck's ass to see if it had a winning number. All I had was kiddie prizes, so there was no percentage in it for anybody else.

It would have been a different story if I'd been on the cat rack or the swinger or Gary's buckets joint, where marks paid to toss balls into gaffed baskets. But from the look Brownie had given me after seeing my take, I'd be herding ducks and handing out Taiwanese paper bird whistles to rube kids until my hair turned gray. To add insult to injury, Brownie's daughter Lorinda had been

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with him when he collected the money, and though she stayed behind to talk with me for a minute, that went south when Gary came over to ask if she'd go out to eat with him. Even though the look she gave me said she'd rather go with me, there was no way I could make a counter offer with an empty grouch bag. So off she went with Gary, leaving me with the damned stuffed snakes.

I'd known the duck pond was going to be hard work, but I hadn't thought it would be that hard. Like every other townie turned carny, I'd started out as a ride boy, making chump change that barely paid for my meals and a bed in the bunkhouse, which was nothing but a dingy trailer fitted out with pallets. Early on, Squeezebox Sam had pointed me toward the games, telling me that was where the real money was, but it had taken me a solid month to talk Brownie into giving me a chance, and he probably wouldn't have done it then if Lorinda hadn't pushed him. So there I was, a game agent at last, and I was sleeping with the plush. I had half a mind to pack up in the morning and hitch a ride back home. At least when I worked at the factory, I'd had a real bed to sleep in.

Then again, back home there'd been no Lorinda or anybody who kissed anywhere near as good as she did. The thing was, she'd been with it since she was born. She wasn't going to want to give up show business to live over my parents' garage. That meant I had to stick it out, but with Gary in the picture, maybe I was wasting my time with her, too. I was trying to work it all out when I heard the voices.

"Are you sure this is the place?" some jerk said. I didn't recognize the voice, so I knew it was a townie.

"Of course I'm sure," another townie jerk said. "Right under the duck pond tent. There's the oak tree we leaned the shovels against."

"Are you sure? I thought it was that tree over there."

"I'm telling you it was this here oak tree. They pitched the tent right over the spot where we buried him."

Buried *him*? I'd been about to yell at them to shut their yaps, but I didn't so much as breathe loud after that.

Jerk number two went on, "We've got nothing to worry about. Nobody's going to find him."

"What if they find him when they pull out those tent stakes?"

"Don't be an idiot! Those stakes aren't in more than a few inches—we dug that hole a good six feet deep. Now let's get gone before somebody wants to know what we're doing here."

I couldn't hear any footsteps on the mixture of dust and hay that covered the lot, but I could hear voices getting lower and lower, and I thought I heard the distant sound of a car starting up a few

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minutes later. Still, I was in no hurry to make any noise for a good while after. Instead, I considered the situation, and it seemed to me that I could do one of three things.

One, I could find a pay phone and call the local cops, but considering the facts that I'd drunk a beer or two before facing Brownie with my pitiful take, and that I'd bummed a couple more afterward so I wouldn't think too hard about what Lorinda was doing with Gary, I didn't think they'd be inclined to listen, especially since I couldn't describe the men I'd heard talking, and I didn't even know who'd been killed.

Two, I could go roust Brownie out of his bed, but between the beers and my humiliating performance earlier, he probably wouldn't believe me either. It was more likely that he'd rip me a new one for disturbing him, and I'd have to tell him off. Then he'd probably chase me off the lot, possibly for good, but definitely long enough to ruin my chances with Lorinda.

Or three, I could go to sleep.

It didn't take me long to settle on that one.

I got up early the next day, meaning that I was awake before noon, and maybe it was the humiliation of sleeping with the plush or my jealousy at seeing Lorinda go off with Gary, but I woke up determined to turn over a new leaf.

One thing I hadn't changed my mind about was doing anything about the killers I'd overheard. Truth was, once it was daylight, I started wondering if I hadn't dreamt the whole thing. When I was eating bacon and eggs at the cook shack, I did ask if anybody had seen anybody wandering about after closing time, but other than Handsome Harry claiming that two townie women had snuck into his trailer for a night of humping and thumping, nobody had. And he was likely lying anyway.

No, my plan that day was to make myself into the best damned agent I could be, and if Brownie wanted me to work the duck pond, I was going to work it so hard every child who stepped onto the lot would grab ducks like they were gold. So when I took that sheet and blanket back to Squeezebox Sam, I told her I was going to take her up on her offer to teach me how to be an agent.

And teach me she did. By the time she was done, I knew how to tell which townies had money in their pockets and which ones had less than I did. I knew when to charm the ladies, when to bully the men, and when to shut the hell up. I didn't know it all, not by any means, but I had what I needed to start.

It was Friday, which meant we opened up the show at four, and by three-thirty, I was ready. The flash plush was hung on the sides of the tent to lure in the kiddies and hidden away in boxes was the

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slum—the rubber worms, Chinese handcuffs, and plastic basketballs they actually won most of the time. I'd changed the water in the pond, shined up the ducks, and souped up the hydraulic pump that stirred the water so that those ducks were swimming like Esther Williams. I had a smile on my face that was one part Santa Claus and one part every kid's grandfather. When Brownie came by on his preopening inspection, I stood up straight and looked him right in the eye. Hell, I damned near saluted.

Brownie just grunted. Gary, who was tagging along for some reason, grunted too.

I didn't care, because Lorinda was right behind them, and she gave me a smile that didn't have a thing to do with Santa Claus, though I sure wanted some under my Christmas tree.

A couple of minutes later, Brownie came over the loudspeaker to announce that the show was open. The crowd started rolling in, and I started pushing ducks. I smiled, I grinned, I cajoled. I did Donald and Daffy Duck imitations that had the kids laughing so hard they wet their pants, and flirted with the ugliest mothers I'd ever seen just to get more quarters in my money apron. Damn, I was good.

But even Donald Duck can't convince a townie to keep his kid up too far past bedtime, so around eight thirty I handed out the evening's last teddy bear to a kid who was so tired he didn't even fuss when his mama and daddy told him it was time to go home.

"Can we come again tomorrow?" the kid wanted to know.

"No, the carnival has to leave," Mama told him.

I thought about letting her know we'd be there through Sunday, but didn't think Daddy would want his kid whining all weekend long, so I let it slide.

"Will it be back?" the kid asked, still angling for another visit.

"Maybe next summer," Mama said.

"Well, they won't be coming back here," Daddy said. "By next May, there'll be houses right where we're standing. They're breaking ground on a new development the month after next."

Mama shot him a look that would have shriveled me up for a week, and I could see Junior was starting to think about crying.

"My boss is already looking for a new place to set up next year," I put in quickly, "so you be sure and come see me. Maybe you'll win that giant Snoopy."

Junior looked satisfied, Mama looked happy, and Daddy looked at me to make sure I was talking to his kid and not his wife. Then they headed off, leaving me with nothing better to do than stare gloomily at the agents who were bringing in money from grownups hand over fist, even if their call wasn't half as good as mine. They didn't have to wreck their throats talking like a cartoon char-

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acter, either. The sensible thing would have been for me to lower the awnings and lash them to the tent frame for the night, but Brownie had a strict rule about sloughing a joint until he officially shut down the show, so I was stuck there, hoping Lorinda would come by.

At least I was flush enough to be sure I wasn't going to have to sleep with the plush again, but thinking about that got me to thinking about what I'd heard about a buried body the night before. If what that townie daddy had said was true, and if there really was a stiff under the lot, it was going to get covered up with houses and streets and such before too long. In fact, they might get lucky and find the body while digging somebody's basement, so it would come out all right without me or the show getting involved.

Unless . . .

Say they did dig up that body in a month or two. I was guessing those townies hadn't planted him too long ago, or they wouldn't still be worrying about him, but by then, how would anybody be able to tell if the poor sap had been dead six months or six weeks? These days, they probably have some way to get it down to the hour, but back then, not even a big city had that kind of know-how, let alone a nothing town in the middle of nowhere. A place like that was lucky if they had a cop who could tell the body was dead.

But even the dumbest sheriff would eventually figure out the body was no longer breathing, and he'd be bound to start wondering how the poor sap had ended up there. If he was like every other sheriff in the country, I'd bet my last duck pond quarter that he'd try to find an outsider to blame it on, and it wouldn't take him long to remember that Fenton's Family Festival had been set up on that lot. Sure as shooting, he'd start issuing warrants and calling other cops so he could track us down and drag us back to cause all kinds of commotion. Whether or not it came down on me personally, it wouldn't be good for the show.

I knew I was in over my head, so I held onto my patience with my fingernails, but as soon as Brownie gave the signal, my tent was tied up tighter than a preacher's wife's knees, and I was on my way to find Squeezebox again.

Squeezebox was having a smoke outside the grab joint, and I could see Junebug inside washing up.

"Squeezebox," I said, "I need some advice."

"Didn't I give you plenty of free advice today? You ought to know enough about being an agent now to make a fortune, marry the boss's daughter, and run this show. Which is what you're after, isn't it?"

"This is something different." I explained the situation, ending

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with, "What do you think? Should I tell Brownie? Will he believe me?"

"Damned right you should tell him—if he doesn't check it out, he's a fool, and Brownie's no fool. But I'll go with you to talk to him, just in case." Then she added, "Don't thank me. I'd do nigh onto anything to get out of cleaning up. Let's go before Junebug realizes I've had time to smoke a whole pack."

We headed for the show's back yard, where those who could afford trailers set them up, but there was no answer to our knock at Brownie's Airstream. That was unusual. Even if Brownie was still out collecting, Mrs. Fenton usually stayed in the trailer to handle paperwork. Rather than try to chase him around the lot, we sat on the step to wait, and before too long, up strutted Gary, trying to look like a big shot. He was too skinny to do it right.

"Where have you been?" he asked me. "I went by the duck pond to get your take, but when you weren't there, I figured either you'd snuck out with it or there wasn't anything to give me." He laughed as if he'd said something funny.

"I was just looking for Brownie to give it to him," I lied. Fact was, I'd forgotten all about the money, what with the corpse and all, and I was still wearing my apron filled with quarters. "Have you seen him?"

"Haven't you heard? Brownie's in-laws live two towns over, so he took Lorinda and the missus to visit them. I'm in charge until they get back."

"Brownie left the show over the weekend?" I said.

"The old lady had been nagging him about it for a couple of weeks, and I guess Lorinda started in on him too, so he finally said he'd do it just to shut them up. He knows I can handle things here. He's even put me in charge of getting us to the next stand—he'll meet us there." Gary puffed himself up further, but when we didn't look impressed, he snapped, "Did you make any money or not?"

I handed over my take, then watched him trying to look unimpressed as he counted it. "Not bad," he finally said. "For a new agent, that is."

"I'd like to see you make that kind of money on the duck pond," Squeezebox said indignantly.

Gary snorted. "What about your take?"

"Junebug will bring Brownie's cut over when he gets back."

"I'm in charge, and I want that money tonight."

"Don't tell me—tell Junebug."

Since Junebug was twice as big as Gary, and three times as mean, I wasn't surprised when all he said was, "All right, but I'm going to have to tell Brownie."

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"Call him now, if you want," Squeezebox said.

"No need for that," he said quickly. "Mrs. Fenton said not to phone unless it's an emergency. She doesn't want anybody ruining her weekend with the family. That's why I'm the only one with the number." He looked down his nose at us. "Well? Do you two want anything else?"

I was going to tell him, but I saw Squeezebox shaking her head. "I guess not."

"Then if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do." He marched up into Brownie's Airstream, his head held so high he banged it on the top of the doorway before he slammed the door behind him.

"What in hell is Brownie thinking, leaving that guy in charge?" I demanded as we headed back for the grab joint.

"Kid, everybody has a blind spot—that idiot is Brownie's. I hear Gary's parents are friends of his, but they had to get out of the business. They sent Gary here so Brownie could show him the ropes."

"That's just great! Do you think we can track Brownie down ourselves?"

"I doubt it—I don't know Mrs. Fenton's maiden name, or which town her folks live in."

"Then what do we do?"

"I guess we wait for Brownie to meet us at the next stand," she said, but I knew she wasn't happy about it.

"By then it might be too late! This is going to come back and bite us on the ass, you know it is. We've got to get it taken care of now. Even if it means dealing with Gary."

"Gary won't do anything."

"He will if you, or maybe Junebug—"

"Gary won't do anything for a pair of bull dykes."

I blinked. I'd kind of known Squeezebox and Junebug weren't just roommates, but nobody had ever said it so plain before. I gave it half a second's thought, and decided it didn't matter to me. "Then I guess we handle it ourselves." I was kind of hoping she'd try to talk me out of it, but she just nodded. "The easiest thing would be to dig up the stiff and move it somewhere else, where nobody would connect it with us."

"Too risky. We don't know the territory, so we don't have a good place to dump him, and we'd have to use a car to even try."

"You've got a car."

"Junebug has a car," she corrected me, "and with my luck, some dumb cop would stop us before we got a mile away. You want to try to explain why we've got a dead man in the trunk? Or tell Junebug why her car is in an impound lot? And that's assuming we could dig it up without being spotted, and for that matter, that we could find

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it in the first place. It's not like the killers left a treasure map."

That's what gave me the idea, and to understand the idea, you've got to understand townies. I'm not saying townies are dumb, but have you ever wondered why a townie will plunk down a dollar or ten dollars or twenty dollars to try for some cheap piece of plush when he could buy a better toy outright for a whole lot less money? Even when they're sure in their little hearts that our games are rigged, they keep playing, and I'll tell you why. It's because of what every agent says over and over: Win a Prize! Don't earn it, because earning is no fun. Come *win* something. It's human nature to want to win, even if the prize is slum. So with Squeezebox's help, I came up with a way to make the townies want to win a corpse.

Of course, getting it all arranged took more than just Squeezebox's help. Junebug was in on it, and a couple of ride boys I was friendly with, and some of the other agents. Gary had done a good job of making people dislike him, so we had plenty of people we could ask, but Squeezebox made sure we only got carnies we could trust.

Even with all that help, I had lots to do, both that night and the next day. It took money too, every bit I had, and I had to sign IOUs for the rest—it was my idea, so it only seemed right that I pay the freight. Of course that meant I had to sleep with the plush again, but that didn't bother me. I was too busy worrying about what might go wrong.

The next day, Squeezebox drove me and the ride boys to a printing office, and with a few free-ride tickets, we bribed the printer into making up a stack of posters while we waited. Then the ride boys put posters up all over town, while Squeezebox and I went back to the lot to get things ready there.

Junebug had already found some rope and stakes to mark off a big pen of land just past the back lot where the best rides were, and somebody else had found some extra bunting and strings of lights to add some flash. I hung some more posters around the lot, just to make sure everybody who came to the show got an eyeful.

We were lucky. Gary slept late, probably worn out from throwing his weight around, so he was probably the last person in town to find out about the contest. I was getting a bite at the cook shack when he stormed up, one of the posters in his hand. "What the hell is this about?"

There hadn't been time to make the poster fancy, but the printer had found a picture of a pirate's treasure chest to put over the words:

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TREASURE HUNT TODAY
Win $50
at Fenton's Family Festival
$1 Buys a Chance to Dig for a
TREASURE CHEST
FILLED WITH CASH
Starting at 6 P.M.
Bring Your Own Shovel
Adults Only

I'd thought about not charging, but Squeezebox convinced me that we had to charge something or nobody would believe we'd buried anything. She was the one who said they should bring their own shovels too, but I added the part about adults only. I didn't want some kid to find the body. Not that Gary appreciated the thought that went into the details—all he cared about was that something was going on that he hadn't been told about.

He waved the poster around, yelling, "Who put these up? Who authorized this contest?"

Nobody answered, even those who knew what was going on. I don't know if it was loyalty to me, dislike of Gary, or just curiosity to see what was going to happen next. Which was for Gary to buttonhole people he suspected might be the ringleaders: Jumps the rides manager, Lulu from the cat rack, and Ugly Bob the drunk who kept the show's generator running. Gary even went after Junebug, which showed how mad he was. Maybe I should have been insulted that he didn't accuse me, but I was just as glad he didn't. When he realized nobody was going to tell him anything, he muttered something about finding out who was behind it if it was the last thing he did, and stomped off.

Of course, we knew he'd be planning to show up at the treasure hunt at six. "You sure you're going to be able to get him out of the way?" I asked Squeezebox.

"Leave it to Junebug," she said. "Brownie always comes by to get a lemonade before opening, and you know Gary won't miss the chance to do the same and get something for free. So we're going to add a little something extra to it." I don't know what Junebug put in that lemonade, but when Gary drank it just before opening time, he passed right out. I had a couple of ride boys waiting to lug him to his trailer and tuck him in.

"I'll take over the buckets joint for him," Squeezebox said, "unless you want to give it a try."

I was tempted, but I said, "I'll stick with the ducks—I've got too much on my mind to try something new."

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A little while later Squeezebox gave word to open up, and the townies started streaming in. Half the men I saw were carrying shovels.

I'd thought that as distracted as I was, I'd be useless on the duck pond, but I did pretty well. It being a Saturday helped—there were plenty of kids around—but mostly it was because I was so jazzed that I think I could have talked Brownie Fenton himself into buying a duck. The afternoon flew by, and soon it was five thirty, and Squeezebox was on the loudspeaker announcing that the treasure hunt would be starting shortly. Most of the crowd started heading that way, so I went ahead and shut down the duck pond so I could hightail it to the treasure hunt pen and start selling tickets. People were handing me dollar bills so quick I couldn't keep track, and it looked as if I might actually make back what I'd spent.

Squeezebox, Junebug, and some of the others came over to get the townies to line up and make sure nobody started digging early. At six o'clock on the nose, Squeezebox handed me the microphone so I could explain the rules.

It was funny. I'd spent all day talking people out of quarters, but now, with what looked like half the men from that town staring at me, I got stage fright. What shook me out of it was when the local sheriff, a tall man with a frown that would curdle milk, walked up.

"Gentlemen, welcome to the Fenton Family Festival Treasure Hunt," I said. "The rules are simple. Buried somewhere in that pen is a treasure chest with fifty dollars in it. All you've got to do is dig it up, and you'll get to take it home, chest and all. In the case of a dispute, your fine sheriff here will decide the winner. Are there any questions?"

There weren't.

"Then good luck!" The game boys pulled down a section of the fence and the men poured in like . . . well, like townies at a carny.

The sheriff ambled over. "I never saw this gag before. You sure you've got enough men digging to make back that fifty dollars?"

"Maybe not," I said nonchalantly. "The idea was to get people to come to the show. They'll spend enough on rides and games for us to make our money back."

"If you say so," he said doubtfully. "It's a hell of a life you people live."

I had to grin. "Yes sir, it is a hell of a life."

Ten minutes passed, then another ten. The crowd watching was getting restless, and the diggers were getting suspicious. So was the sheriff. I caught Squeezebox's eye, but all she could do was shrug her shoulders. Another ten minutes went by, and I was starting to sweat. Then I heard the sweetest sound I'd ever heard a townie make—somebody yelled "JESUS CHRIST ON A CRUTCH!"

"Did you find the chest?" a voice called.

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"I found a chest all right, and the arms and head too. There's a body in here."

We carnies held back as the sheriff ran in and directed the diggers to uncover the rest of the body. In no time, the diggers had him out, a fellow who'd probably looked a lot better before he'd been in the ground so long. I wouldn't have expected the man's own mother to recognize him in that condition, but somebody said, "I know those boots! That's Jackie Barron!"

The plan had worked so well I was having a hard time not laughing out loud, but it got better. One of the townies who hadn't entered the contest turned to the man next to him and said, "I told you that was the oak tree we buried Jackie under."

The other man hissed, "Shut up, you damned fool." Then, when he realized they'd been heard, he shoved the first man, hard, and took off running for the parking lot.

The sheriff shouted for somebody to grab the man who'd spilled the beans, and legged it after the escaping one. I wouldn't have bet on him catching up if I hadn't remembered the microphone in my hand. What I did was the first thing I learned when I joined the carny, which was how to get help. I yelled, "Hey, rube!"

Carnies came from everywhere, tackling the running man before he knew they were there. He punched and kicked for all he was worth, but there were a dozen carnies, and it wasn't hard for the sheriff to get the handcuffs on him. There were plenty of townies willing to drag both prisoners out to the police cruiser, acting as cocky as if *they'd* caught him, instead of us.

I was feeling a might cocky myself when the sheriff came back and said, "I'd like a word with you."

"Why don't you ask me your questions, Sheriff," a familiar voice said. Every bit of my cockiness dripped off of me. Brownie Fenton had brought his family back early.

It's a good thing Brownie didn't give me a chance to speak to the sheriff because I'm not sure I could have managed to get a word out. The sheriff started out suspicious, but I saw firsthand why Brownie was the boss—he turned on the charm and explained away every concern. The sheriff's last question was one I hadn't even thought about. He wanted to know if we were going to finish the contest.

Brownie didn't even hesitate. "Under the circumstances, I think it would be disrespectful to continue. Instead, Fenton's Family Festival is going to present the fifty dollars prize money to the late man's family."

There was a murmur of approval from the townies, until one man said, "What about my dollar? Do I get it back?"

"Certainly," Brownie said, "if you want it. Or you can accept a five-

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dollar book of ride tickets so you can enjoy the carnival instead." Damned if Lorinda wasn't already holding a stack of tickets. None of those men could resist the combination of free rides and Lorinda's smile, and every one of them took the tickets. It was a smooth move. Giving away rides cost Brownie next to nothing, and the longer the townies stuck around, the more they'd spend on drinks and hot dogs. And since they'd all had their hearts set on winning *something* that day, they were going to be hitting the games too. The sheriff looked satisfied as he left to take his prisoners away.

Next, Brownie took the microphone from me and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, despite the horrific events, Fenton's Family Festival will meet its obligation to entertain the people of this community." Then he gave the carnies who were still hanging around a meaningful look, and they caught on that it was time for them to get back work. I wouldn't have minded sneaking back to the duck pond myself, but I didn't get the chance.

Instead, Brownie pulled me over to where none of the townies could hear us, with Squeezebox and Lorinda following. He didn't look mad, exactly, but he didn't look like he was ready to beg me to marry Lorinda and give him a mess of grandkids, either.

"Kid, I want the real story—all of it."

I swallowed hard, and looked over at Squeezebox. She was looking concerned, and I knew my staying with the show depended on what I told Brownie. So I repeated what I'd overheard the killers saying, and explained the choices as I'd seen them.

"Then you went to sleep," he said. "With a dead man underneath you. Didn't they teach you anything about civic responsibility in that wide spot in the road you came from?"

I swallowed again. I hadn't thought about it that way before, but I had to defend myself somehow. "Yes, sir, but the way I understand it, civic responsibility means responsibility to your city. Well, I've never even been in this town before, so it sure as hell isn't my city."

Brownie was still looking at me, poker-faced.

"I mean, townies have all kinds of people looking out for them—police, county cops, state troopers, the National Guard, on up to the FBI and the Marines. If all those yahoos can't keep them from killing each other and burying bodies, what chance do I have? Carnies, on the other hand, don't have anybody but ourselves, and I swear that if I'd heard some townie whispering about a dead carny, I'd have been on him like white on rice." I would have too, even if it had been Gary who'd been killed. "Besides which, I didn't see any percentage in causing a stink and chasing off business. We'd have had to shut the show down early, which wouldn't have done anybody any good."

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"Especially not you."

"True enough," I admitted. "I've got plans, Mr. Fenton, and I'm not going to get anywhere with an empty grouch bag." Deliberately, I looked over at Lorinda, who was watching the whole thing, so he'd know what my intentions were.

Brownie kind of grunted, and I still didn't know if he was on my side or not. "Just answer me two questions," he said. "What if somebody had found the treasure chest before they found the body?"

"We never buried any chest."

He nodded, in approval I thought. "Then what would you have done if the killers hadn't lost the body, if they really had buried him under the duck pond?"

"Huh? They did. I dug him up and moved him last night. First of all, I had to be sure he was really there, and once I had him out of the ground, I figured I might as well put him someplace more convenient. I didn't see any reason to move the duck pond if I didn't have to."

Brownie stared at me for a second, then broke out into a belly laugh and clapped me on the shoulder. "Treasure Hunt, maybe you've got a future here after all."

"Treasure Hunt?" I liked the sound of it. Like Squeezebox Sam said, you're not a real carny until you've got a nickname.

## HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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# THE CART THIEF

## RACHEL DUNSTAN MULLER

The first time was an accident.

I was inspecting honeydew in the produce section of Save-Rite, on account of how particular Adelaide is about her melons. I never did quite understand the function of all that thumping and squeezing, but I go through the motions as I'm told. When I turned around with the two likeliest specimens in my hands, the cart was gone. It happens that I lose things from time to time. I'm the most distractible man she's ever known, says Adelaide. I'd wander away from my own feet if they weren't fastened to my ankles.

The cart wasn't far. I found it just on the other side of the display case, beside the onions. So many kinds of onions in the stores these days: red onions, yellow onions, sweet onions, Spanish onions, Walla Walla. Adelaide's list said to get the ones that came in a mesh bag, three pounds for sixty-nine cents. It said weigh the bags and take the heaviest one.

I read the headlines as I waited in line at the checkout. "Parrot Abducted by Aliens, Comes Back with Message for Earth." "Woman Gives Birth to German Shepherd Cross." "Jelly Bean Diet—Lose Thirty Pounds by Christmas." Now with marvels like that all around, is it any wonder that I didn't notice the bag of bean sprouts or the bottle of soy sauce as I lifted them to the conveyor?

I looked up from the *Enquirer* just in time to see the cashier pick up a bag of cashews and swing it toward the scale. "Hold on a minute," I said. "That's not mine."

The girl's arm froze. "You don't want the cashews?"

"They aren't mine." I checked the remaining items on the conveyor, and it twigged. "None of this is mine. I must've taken someone else's cart."

The bag of nuts remained suspended in midair. The girl stared blankly—I expect she was waiting for the punch line.

"I've unloaded the wrong cart," I repeated.

The cashier's blue-rimmed eyes narrowed. "I've rung in eighteen items already. You're saying you want me to take them all off again?"



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Adelaide was at her post at the kitchen table when I returned home. "Bamboo shoots?" she said. "What on earth possessed you to buy a can of bamboo shoots?"

I nodded, trying to look confident. "Thought I'd make something different." I do most of the cooking as well as the shopping since Adelaide's been laid up with her bad knee. "Thought I'd try something Oriental for a change."

Adelaide's mouth got smaller like it does whenever she says I'm being headstrong. "You won't find anything Oriental in the *Betty Crocker.*"

"I'll get a book from the library."

"You got this all planned out," she said, lips the size of a dime.

"Yep."

"What's this?" She held up a can of Fancy Feast, savory salmon flavor.

I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose. "Never know when a stray's gonna show up at the door."

Adelaide stared hard at me through her own bifocals. "Since when are you and stray cats on friendly terms, Henry Cooke?"

No answer to that but a shrug.

"Least you remembered the milk and eggs," said Adelaide.

It was another month before it happened again. It wasn't premeditated, but it wasn't exactly an accident, either. I was shopping from another of Adelaide's lists like I was supposed to, a box of Bisquick from the baking aisle, a pound of margarine, and a half gallon of milk from the dairy case, then on to frozen foods in the center of the store. I let my eyes drift as I wheeled my cart up and down the aisles. Once in a while I'd catch sight of something interesting in someone else's buggy, like a package of wonton wrappers or a bag of fresh asparagus, but I kept my hands to myself.

There was a cart standing all by itself in front of a case of Stouffer's frozen entrees. I had to work my way between the cart and a rack of expired baked goods to get to the frozen juice that was on sale halfway down the aisle. I inventoried the cart as I passed: a few loaves of French bread, a box of muesli, some chicken breasts, and a coil of salami. I couldn't tell for sure what was under the bread, but it looked like a bag of pasta, the fresh kind, and maybe a small block of cheese. There was produce in the basket at the front, orange and yellow peppers, a bag of plum tomatoes, and a shiny eggplant that was so purple it was almost black. It was that perfect eggplant that pushed me over the edge. I looked up and down the aisle.

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It was clear. Within seconds I'd transferred everything I wanted to keep from my old cart into the new one.

Why didn't I just grab the eggplant and go? you're asking. Why didn't I wander on over to the produce section and choose my own eggplant? I pondered those very questions as I made a beeline for the nearest checkout with my stolen cart. Truth is, it was that particular eggplant that I wanted, not some runner-up left in the bin. And the eggplant alone wasn't enough. It was part of something greater; I had to have the whole collection it came from. It's a queer explanation, I know. I never did come up with a more satisfactory one.

Adelaide's mouth was so drawn, it was almost inside out. "Are you going batty on me, Henry?" she demanded. "I send you out for pork chops and a jar of applesauce, and you come back with this?" She glared at the eggplant in her hand. "We've never had an eggplant in our entire lives!"

"Too late to start when we're in the grave," I said calmly. "Better try it now while we've still got the chance."

She dropped the offending vegetable back down on the counter. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Eggplant Parmesan. Got the recipe from the library on the way home."

It came out just like the picture in the book, a bubbling layer of mozzarella and Parmesan, the edges of the eggplant black and crispy against a sea of red tomato sauce. Adelaide took one look at the casserole and shook her head, said I knew she'd never been one for "Eye-talian" food. I told her to shut her eyes and just smell the thing, for God's sake. Just to be polite, she took a small bite. Her mouth opened wide after that. I'm sure she'd have had a third helping if there'd been any left after our seconds.

"You can wipe that smug grin off your face," she said, as I gathered up the empty plates. "It was all the bill paying and check-book balancing I had to do this afternoon that gave me an appetite."

After that it became a kind of hobby. I selected and appropriated one cart a week, like clockwork. Adelaide squawked a little about the grocery bills—fancy fruits and cheeses don't come cheap—but I was firm on the matter. "I'm the shopper, you're the accountant," I said. "If you don't like the way I shop, you can do it yourself."

"I don't know what's come over you," said Adelaide, her mouth an unreadable line.

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Truth is, I get a high from it. I'd start a chapter, if I could. Cart Thieves Anonymous. We'd share stories, swap tips, talk about the ones that got away. There's an art and a science to it; it's not just grab and run. For starters, if you don't want to get caught, you don't hit the same store more than once every couple of months. I make a circuit: Save-Rite, Safeway, Save-On-Foods, Food Country, Country Grocer, Shop-Rite. And you want to pick the right time, when the stores are nice and busy. I favor Friday nights or Saturday mornings.

If you want to be successful, you've got to make yourself inconspicuous, just another shopper going about your business. A man would look a bit queer wandering the store with his hands in his pockets staring into other people's carts. You've got to have some cover, a list in one hand, a basket in the other. You fill the basket with the things you need that you can't count on finding in someone else's cart. The basket makes for an easy transfer when the time comes.

Next you've got to find your mark. Well-dressed, middle-aged women are a good bet for quality and variety. You've got to be careful, though. The Oprah set can be suckers for anything carb-reduced or fat-free. If you want quantity, by all means follow the young woman who's shopping for her family. If you want staples and whatever's on sale that week, watch the grannies. Men are wild cards. You never know what you're going to find in a man's shopping cart: beer nuts, frozen lasagna, strawberries, and fresh cream. And that's what it's all about: what's in the cart.

The Safeway parking lot was an obstacle course of cars circling for the best spot, and shoppers scurrying to get out of the rain. It always amazes me that there are so few fatalities in store parking lots on dark autumn nights. I skirted the whole mess as best I could and made directly for the bank of empty spaces at the far edge of the lot.

There was a stack of molded plastic baskets just inside the automatic doors. I helped myself to one, and started off on my circuit. There were a few interesting buggies near the in-store bakery, but nothing to really turn my head. I hesitated by a cart full of East Indian ingredients near the egg case, but I knew it wasn't the one. There was more food in that buggy than Adelaide and I could eat in a season. I grabbed a dozen medium eggs and kept walking, past screaming toddlers and their shattered mothers, past women in business suits and men in worn overalls. I stalked a denim-jacketed young man from a safe distance all the way from produce to the laundry aisle. The grapes and kiwis and pomegranates in his front

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basket looked promising, but then he went and wedged two jumbo packages of diapers under the cart. I moved on.

I spotted another possibility in aisle five, between shelves of canned tomato products and packages of dried pasta. The woman behind the cart was about ten years younger than Adelaide, in a gray suit with a matching leather briefcase. I checked the cart out of the corner of my eye as she pushed it past me. I knew it was the one immediately. I get an itch in my fingers sometimes when a cart is especially good. This time my hands were on fire.

I backed up and pretended to take an interest in tomato sauces, all the while studying the contents of that magic buggy. Half a dozen wedges, rounds and rectangles of cheese, soft and hard and in-between. Pâtés and tiny sausages. Tins of smoked oysters and escargots. Olives, pickles, and antipasto. Fresh crab cakes. Adelaide would scream about the expense for sure, but I had to have those crab cakes. I could already taste them, sautéed with a little butter and sprinkled with lemon. I could feel them melting in my mouth.

The lady in gray took a small jar of anchovies off the shelf and started walking. I waited a moment, then turned my cart and followed. "Head to the produce aisle," I pleaded silently. There's no better place to take possession of a cart than the produce aisle. You just wait until your cart pusher is filling a bag with lemons or lychee nuts, and then you grab your new cart and stride away. The gray lady made for the dairy case instead. She took a carton of light cream from the shelf and continued on.

I followed at a safe distance, down the baking aisle and up the laundry aisle, past toiletries and around cases of frozen foods. For one heart-stopping moment I was sure she was on to me. She doubled back in the cereal aisle—I quickly grabbed the nearest box of cornflakes—and pushed her cart right up to me. But all she wanted to know was if I'd seen polenta anywhere. I had to confess I didn't even know what polenta was. I was saved by the kid who arrived with a crate of Cocoa Puffs a moment later. He directed her to aisle eight.

I was more careful after that. I knew where my target was most of the time, but I kept at least an aisle away. We crisscrossed the store a few times while I waited for my opportunity. I cursed when I saw her leave the canned vegetable aisle and head straight for the checkout. But then, just when I was sure it was all over, she veered off suddenly toward produce after all.

It was all green lights from there. The gray lady parked her cart by the bananas and walked across to have a look at the display of organic peppers. As she inspected the colorful vegetables, I grabbed my shopping basket and balanced it on top of her cart. Less than

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half a minute later, I was standing in line at checkout number eleven.

"Did you find everything you were looking for this evening?" asked the cashier. She was a pretty, dimpled little thing, about the age of Sarah, my youngest grandchild.

"Yes indeed," I said, breathing heavily. "Got everything I was after."

"Looks like you're having a fancy party," said the girl, as she scanned a box of crackers.

I shrugged modestly. "Just thought I'd treat the wife. She doesn't get out much these days."

I waited until the last item was through before turning around. The gray lady was just a few aisles over. She was in animated conversation with one of the burgundy-smocked boys from produce and an older man in a dress shirt and tie.

"That's eighty-seven fifty," said the cashier.

I counted out the bills from my wallet, and took two quarters from my change pouch.

The girl handed me my receipt. "You have a nice night, now."

I was on the sidewalk outside when the store manager caught up with me.

"Yes?" I asked.

He was a big man, about twenty years my junior. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But I'm going to have to ask you to step back inside the store for a moment."

"What's this about?" I asked, stretching as tall as my five feet four inches would allow.

"I'd be more comfortable discussing this in private," the manager said.

"If it's about the groceries, I paid for them," I said. "They're rightfully mine now."

"There's a shopper inside the store who says she saw you take some things."

"They're mine," I insisted. "I'm the one who paid for them. I've got the receipt right here."

"It really might be better if we discussed this in my office," said the manager, tugging at his mustache.

"I haven't committed any crime," I said loudly, aware of the cluster of onlookers that had gathered a few yards away. "Groceries remain the property of the store until someone pays for them, right? No matter whose cart they're in."

The manager looked confused for a moment. "It's not the groceries you paid for that concern me, sir."

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"But I did pay for them," I said. I forced my hand to remain steady as I held out the receipt. "Go ahead, check it for yourself."

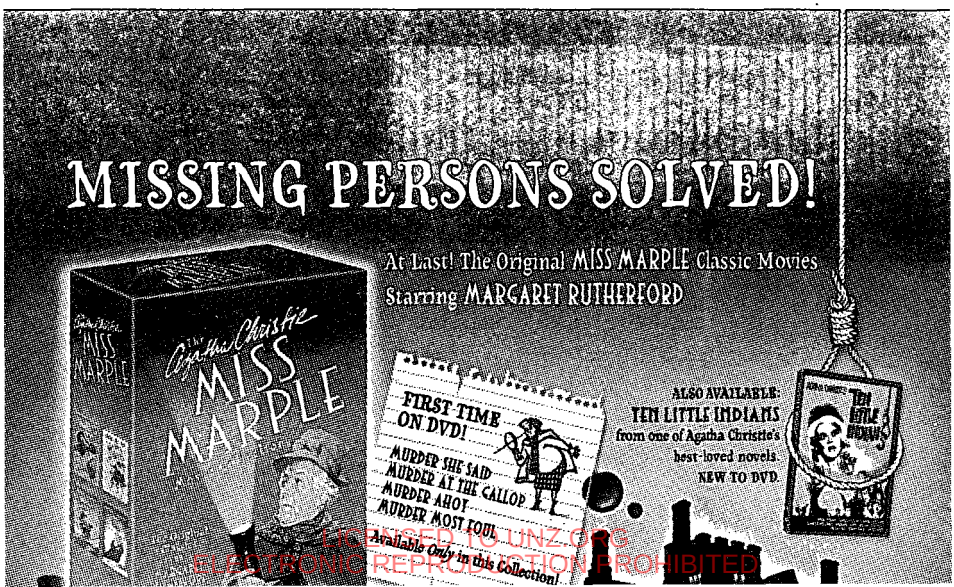
He took the white slip of paper from my hand and scanned it briefly. Then he nodded at the bags in my cart. "Mind if I take a look?"

I waved him on. "Please do."

He knew what he was looking for. She'd told him exactly where to find them, just where she herself had put them, tucked into a box of stoned wheat thins. "Idiot," I cursed silently as the tiny jars of caviar emerged. Why hadn't I noticed that the box of crackers was unsealed?

I have to give the man credit. The jars were in his pocket before any one standing more than a few feet away could see them. "But I didn't—it wasn't—it was her." I fell silent. I'd set myself up, good and proper. The manager took hold of the cart and tipped his head toward the store entrance. I nodded and led the way.

The gray lady was waiting just on the other side of the door. "Thief," she hissed triumphantly as I walked past.



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# PEEWEE AND THE GEWGAW

## JAS. R. PETRIN

It is always the best policy to speak the truth,
unless of course you are an exceptionally good liar.
—*Jerome K. Jerome*

It starts small.

There I am in the lobby of Westbrook Hotel, which is Donny Rumano's place, doing a little cleaning to help settle my bar tab. There is to be a big ribs-and-chicken special, and the place has got to be presentable. I am diligently manipulating the vacuum cleaner, when who should barge in as if the entire vice squad is shooting bullets at him but Peewee Dyck. And he makes tracks straight for me.

His mouth is moving, but the Hoover is howling, and it's as if he isn't really saying anything—one of those mimes. He flings a wild, impatient look around, spots the cord which is powering the vacuum, beetles over to it, and gives it a yank.

As the machine spirals into its death howl, he returns with brisk strides. Suddenly I am able to hear things: the clump of his feet, the sound of his pant legs rubbing together—*swik-swik-swik*—and the last few words he is uttering.

". . . need your help!"

I close my eyes.

Those who always feel, as I do, an obligation to help a fellow creature, should take my advice and not do it. If you must do it, keep it a secret. Otherwise you will have to fend off an unrelenting procession of chumps, saps, dupes and dopes, suckers, mugs, and fools—with only the very occasional innocent victim happening along to brighten the day. And though Peewee Dyck might be

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crud into it. In fact, it is hard to tell the new crud from the old crud, but I want him to know I'm miffed. "You have left a trail like the Abominable Snowman." I attempt to direct his attention to the tracks he has made, but he ignores them. He wrests the vacuum from my hands and hustles me briskly into the dining room, which at this hour is as empty as if the pest control van is parked at the door.

Peewee Dyck hauls out two chairs, shoves one in my direction, and clambers up on the other.

I should explain that Peewee is not a large person. In fact, he is quite the opposite, going maybe four foot, half an inch in a thick pair of socks. Nor is this the first time he comes to me for help: I have still not gotten over the last incident, when there was a lot of shooting and hollering and serious unpleasantness, which is why I'm not keen on us having this chat.

"First," he says, his short legs flat out on the seat cushion, displaying the worn soles of his air-cushion loafers, "I admit that I took the gewgaw. I did it, and I am not going to argue about it. But I had no idea, I swear to you, that it belonged to La-La Lloyd's fiancée. No, I did not. Otherwise, I wouldn't have accidentally climbed in through that window in the first place."

"What's this?" I ask, lifting an eyebrow. "You're a second-story man now?"

"Not by choice. Oh, certainly not. By choice I would be a captain of industry or an international financier. But one must keep body and soul together until more dignified opportunities present themselves."

Solid logic. Hard to argue with.

"So," I continue, in an effort to move things forward, the sooner to get back to my vacuuming, "you boosted a gewgaw from some gal who turns out to be La-La's dearly beloved, and you expect me, as if by magic, to send it floating mysteriously back again."

"Well," he says, "there's a little more to it."

I don't like his look. "Oh? You mean I haven't grasped the fundamental aspect?"

"You have grasped it fundamentally, yes. But there are, you see, a few complications."

Oh yes. The complications. When you deal with a guy like Peewee, there are always going to be complications.

Attempting to become more intimate, Peewee tries to draw his chair closer to mine but fails. Drawing one's chair closer is a difficult thing to do when one's trotters are that far off the floor.

"These complications . . ." he begins.

"Yes."

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"They could be serious . . ."
"Naturally."
"So maybe I should start from the beginning . . ."
"Sure."
And he does.

He tells me that, like others in his line of work, he has peepers distributed here and there about the town in what might be considered locations of opportunity. These are persons who, for a small remittance, keep an eye peeled for situations that might prove fruitful. It happens one of them gives him a buzz one day to identify a guest at the Corona Hotel who is being most careless with a very fine gewgaw, in fact a diamond bracelet, leaving it draped, bunched, and cast down here and there about her rooms most imprudently.

"So naturally," Peewee says, "I beat it quickly to this joint to see for myself. The report is true, so I carry out a rescue—"

"A rescue?"

"Well, certainly. There's no telling what could happen to this trinket in the hands of such a careless woman. So, as I was saying, I conduct the rescue and then hasten swiftly forth."

"So far so good."

"Ah, but not good enough. Before the day is out, I discover the La-La connection. I learn that the hotel guest, registered as Brown, is in actuality a Ms. Preene, La-La Lloyd's most recent near and dear. And I can tell you this revelation does not give me a very cozy feeling inside."

"I'm sure not."

"And if that isn't bad enough, it seems that White Shark is involved."

"*The* White Shark?"

"No other."

"But how does White Shark figure in?"

"He figures in because he is Ms. Preene's bodyguard—appointed by Hightops, La-La's lieutenant, which means the order comes from La-La himself." Peewee shivers. "I am sure he is sharpening his teeth as we speak, preparing to track down the presumptuous pilferer, and inflict on him a severe unpleasantness."

He grimaces miserably.

This is bad news indeed for Peewee. White Shark is a most unpleasant character. When he is circling in your vicinity, you are likely to be found later with pieces missing, nothing spared except possibly your hat.

I can feel my resistance waning.

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"Well," I inform Peewee truthfully, "you have certainly landed yourself in the soup."

"Yes," he agrees, "and I don't even like soup. The question is, what can I do about it?"

"First and foremost, as I always advise, you must carefully examine your options."

"I have options?"

"I'm not saying they're pleasant options."

"Oh."

"First of all, the most obvious. You do nothing. You lie low. You hunker down, you wait things out. You do not emerge into the bright light of day until the storm is well and truly past."

He shakes his head. "This storm will never pass. Not with White Shark involved. He has got to impress his boss."

"Second option. At the first opportunity—anonymously if at all possible—you return the gewgaw safe and sound to Ms. Preene, and then you hunker down."

"That's no good either."

"Why not?"

"Same answer. She is still going to want to know who took it, and I will still have to fend off White Shark."

I bring my hands together.

"I'm out of ideas."

"Two ideas is all you can come up with?"

I reply sharply. "I can come up with as many as necessary, but I need sufficient time to apply my intellect."

He appears to be having second thoughts. At this point I should let him go on his way, but instead—I can't help it!—I see this as a challenge. I send him up to his room, plug the cord back in, and return to my vacuuming. I have found that there is nothing like vacuuming to stimulate the old head machinery. In fact, it is so effective I have often wondered why it wasn't a cleaning lady that discovered the theory of relativity.

This is a tough nut. A real conundrum. There seems to be no hope under heaven for Peewee to emerge from this with his little skin intact. Further to this, I am puzzled, as Peewee is not one to act so precipitately. After a lengthy run at the carpet, I manage to dredge up one more suggestion. A long shot, not too encouraging, but a suggestion all the same. I put the vacuum away, climb the stairs, and make my way down the dingy corridor. I will pass my suggestion along to him, and then I will wash my hands of it.

Peewee's room is exactly like mine, only appearing to be an acre larger with its miniature couch, its tiny dinette suite, and little pint-sized chairs taking up no space at all. And there is Peewee,

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lying flat on the couch with the back of his hand over his beady eyes.

"Peewee," I tell him straight out, "it seems to me that under the circumstances you may have to play a long shot. Like it or not, you may have to take a chance."

"It was taking a chance that got me into this."

"Then take one more and get yourself out of it. Look—" I pull a little chair up to the couch and sit down on it, my knees poking up almost as high as my chin. "There are three people here that we can deal with. There is La-La Lloyd, who you'll agree is not an approachable individual. There is White Shark, who in his own way is even less approachable than La-La. And there is Ms. Preene. We must deal with one of them, so you figure it out. Which of these three persons is most likely to give you a warm reception?"

"That depends on what you mean by warm."

"You know what I mean."

"If you are suggesting," says Peewee, taking his hand away and staring straight at the ceiling, "that the young lady must be a meek and gentle soul, let me correct you. No woman who is meek could lead La-La Lloyd around by the nose, and no woman who is gentle could put up with White Shark for very long. So if you think, somehow, that she is a pushover, I would advise you to think again."

"I'm not suggesting that she is a pushover. I am suggesting that among the three of them, she is the only one who will give you a hearing."

"And suppose she does. What do I tell her? That somehow her bracelet unclasped itself from her wrist and fell into my pocket without me realizing it?"

"No. I don't think she'll buy that."

"Well! I'm impressed. You may just be as smart as they say you are!" He pulls himself up into a sitting position and swings his legs over the edge of the couch. He puts his head in his hands. "I suppose I can throw myself at her mercy. Truth is always the best policy."

An interesting statement, coming from him.

"What you need," I tell him, "is a proper cover story."

"Fine. Let's have one."

"Suppose you make out that you're some sort of repo man, one of the high-class private detective sort. You represent a jewelry store—namebrand company, worldwide reputation. You attended the hotel in question to repossess a bracelet due to back payments owing, but because of a clerical foul up, you were mistakenly sent to the wrong address. Seized the wrong item. So you have come to

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offer copious apologies and to restore to her the item in question."

"What if she demands compensation?"

"Compensation for what?"

"Mental pain. Anguish."

"Then you are stuck. You will have to tell her that the check's in the mail."

Peewee's jaw works for a minute. His shifty eyes puddle deeper in his face. I can see that I have got him thinking, that his little mind is rabbiting away. He gets up and toddles to his fridge, takes a milk jug out and drinks from it, then toddles back to the sofa and plunks himself down again.

"It's thin," he says. "Very thin. But I suppose it could work. Still, you would have to go along with me to lend your moral support."

I was afraid he was going to say that.

Ms. Preene immediately agrees to see us. All it takes is one mention of the bracelet. She occupies a suite in a first-class hotel, the Riverview, which takes up a hectare or so of prime river property, the rent no doubt remitted punctually out of one of La-La Lloyd's innumerable bank accounts. In the lobby, behind a fanned-out newspaper, sits a hulk of a man in a smooth gray suit. I would even suggest it is a sharkskin suit. He has a large swept-back face, a carnivorous jaw, and no facial hair whatsoever.

"That's him!" Peewee practically squeals, talking to me out of the side of his neck. "That's you-know-who!"

On our way up to the suite in the elevator, I have to slap him smartly between the shoulder blades. He's right, of course: the man in the lobby is White Shark, which shows that Peewee's information was correct. White Shark has apparently been assigned to keep an eye on La-La's dearly beloved.

A maid with the overbite of a Rottweiler marches us briskly into Ms. Preene's vicinity.

One glance at Ms. Preene and I'm having doubts. This is a woman who is nobody's fool. She has those very keen green eyes of the sort that can read a book without turning the pages. She has those pixie ears that can hear through walls. On the decorative side, she has platinum, almost silver-blond hair, and wears a satin house robe that trails two feet behind her on the floor.

Peewee immediately launches into his spiel, and I must say that he is very convincing. I almost believe his phony story myself. But somewhere in the middle, when he is hitting his stride, Ms. Preene flips her fingers in the air as if fanning a smell away. "Never mind all that. I know who you are, Peewee Dyck."

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Peewee breaks off in mid untruthfulness. He stands there, utterly silenced, with his mouth half open, one finger raised to deliver a critical point.

"You . . . you do?"

"Yes, I do." She lights a cigarette. She snaps shut the gold-plated Ronson and raps it down on a mirrored tabletop while gusting smoke out of her nose like a dragon. "I know exactly who you are, I had you followed. If you hadn't shown up, I was going to visit you. You came to me for one reason only, and that's because you're scared to death of La-La."

It's as if we have been performing a dramatic piece, and right in the middle of it Ms. Preene snatches the script away. She has summed us up, right square on the nickel. I am sure that she will now summon White Shark, who will rush up from the lobby with his dental work gleaming.

"Where is the bracelet?"

Peewee humbly brings it forth and deposits it in her outstretched hand.

"Look," he mumbles, "I can explain—"

"No you can't," says Ms. Preene dryly, "so don't try. But I don't care about that. That isn't the problem."

Now we *are* bewildered.

"This is a fake," Ms. Preene informs us, dangling the bracelet disdainfully from one manicured finger. "I've known it for days. Believe me, I know real diamonds when I see them, and these are nothing of the sort. These are only strass."

"Strass?" ventures Peewee the jewelry expert. "What's that?"

"Paste."

A dawning light filters into Peewee's eyes. My guess is that he senses a reprieve coming, a call from the governor's mansion just before the needle goes in.

"Well," he says, very amiably, eyeing the now not-so-valuable gewgaw, "that's fine. Just fine."

"It certainly isn't," Ms. Preene replies acidly. "There isn't anything *fine* about it."

"Ah—no. No, of course not."

"And your opinion," says Ms. Preene, "doesn't interest me."

Apparently she is going to tell us what does interest her, for she gestures impatiently at a cluster of chairs. We sit ourselves down. Ms. Preene sits facing us. She carefully arranges her long legs, composes her thoughts, and then lets us have them:

"I know who did this. I know who's behind it. I know how, and I know why. The trouble is, I can't prove any of it, and I can't do much without some evidence."

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"I don't follow."

Peewee is gazing at her like a spaniel.

"Follow this then. Suppose you're me." (There is a strain on Peewee's face as he tries to imagine this.) "And suppose La-La entrusts you with a very fine bracelet. Suppose also that someone wants you out of the picture, someone who knows that if La-La marries you, it won't do his career much good, seeing as you think he is a pain in the tuchis and will make sure La-La ditches him just as soon as it is humanly possible."

She stubs out her cigarette, extracts another, eyes it hungrily, then puts it away again.

"A person like that is a cornered animal. Here is how I think his mind might work. There is the bracelet—a red flag to him since it is worth more than he earns in a year. Why not swipe it, replace it with a fake, and make sure La-La thinks I did it?"

"But why would you? Do such a thing, I mean?"

"To pawn the real one for cash, of course."

"Would he believe that?"

"Why not? I'm always asking for money."

"Ah!"

"Oh yes, I admit it. I have expensive tastes." She taps a cigarette out of the pack again, and this time she lights it, squinting and then snapping the lighter shut. "Still, I love my jewelry. I wouldn't pawn it. That is something I would never do. The trouble is I'm not so sure I can convince La-La of that."

She has a pout on her face now.

I pose the big question. "Who is this 'someone' you are referring to?"

She flicks ash from her cigarette. "Fish Face."

"Fish Face?"

"Yes. Sharkie-boy."

Peewee and I exchange glances. I hesitate. "Excuse me, but are you referring to White Shark?"

"Of course I'm referring to White Shark. He's been trying to get La-La to dump me ever since he first clamped eyes on me. Poisoning La-La's mind against me. Telling him I'm only after his cash. He knew he had to get something to use against me—probably volunteered as my bodyguard so that he could follow me everywhere I go!" She gets up, stabs out her barely smoked cigarette in a lead crystal ashtray, and gives a dry, humorless laugh. "Well, he watched, and he waited, and he couldn't find anything. Then suddenly—presto!—fake jewelry appears." She fixes a suddenly very cutesy gaze on us. "What will La-La think?"

"Well," I respond lamely, "if he respects you—I mean to say if he

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*loves* you—he'll take your word over that of Fish Face—er—I mean White Shark."

She gives her head a shake that makes her platinum pageboy swing. "You don't know him. You don't know what he's like." She gets up, trip-traps on pointy heels to the fireplace, turns and looks at us over folded arms. "Do you know what he gave me when we set our wedding date? Dried flowers! Can you feature it? I mean, *that* should tell you something!"

There is a vase of dried flowers standing behind her on the fireplace mantel.

It doesn't tell me much that I don't already know. I am sure her concerns are fully justified. La-La will take a very aggressive line with her if this scheme of White Shark's is allowed to go forward.

Peewee appears to want to shove things off on me. "Well," he says, sliding off the seat cushion and landing with a thump on both feet, "you're in luck. My friend here is very good at helping people. Perhaps he can help you out. So I think I will toddle off and let the two of you get to work on it." He sidles to the door, his voice trailing behind him. "I only wish," he says with oily earnestness, "that there was something I could do to help."

"There is," Ms. Preene says in a brittle voice, "so put your little keister back in that chair."

She has regained her field marshal tone. Peewee stands there a moment, frozen, then turns and scuttles back to his seat.

"Now listen," Ms. Preene continues, "here is how it is going to be. I'm going to get that bracelet back from White Shark, and you two are going to help me do it.

"The problem I had till now was having to deal with White Shark all by myself. That's why I was at that crummy hotel, and why I used that phony name. I only did it to give him the slip—something I had to do before I could do anything else. I thought I had managed it too, but then he found me again. Now he's always got his fishy eyes on me, and I don't think I'll be able to slip away again."

"But what can we do about it?" Peewee whines.

"You can burgle White Shark for me."

I stare at her.

"You're not serious."

"You better believe I'm serious. And neither one of you better try and weasel out of it!" She has compressed her eyes into mascara slits, with a threatening menace glittering through. "If you do, I'll turn you over to La-La. I'll tell him it was you who switched bracelets, after swiping the real one from me. He'll like that. He may choose to believe it. And I don't have to tell you how

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unpleasant your lives are going to be after that."

With his little legs splayed out, his open mouth, and his sagging jowls, Peewee looks as if he has been whacked with a spade. I don't feel too much better myself. Ms. Preene is clearly a woman on a mission. She lights herself another cigarette and eyes us through the smoke of it the way a prison guard eyes two cons on a work detail. There is not the slightest flicker of sympathy or hint of warmth in her gaze.

"So . . . how exactly would we go about this?" Peewee asks in a thin, bent reed sort of a voice.

"Before we get into that, there's one other little detail—Fish Face isn't to know a thing about it."

"But he's bound to—"

"Not if you work it right. The solution is very simple. You take the fake bracelet with you, and leave it there on his premises in the exact location of the real one. That dope will never know the difference." She drops a chilling smile. "I'm going to turn the tables on him. Show him up for the sneak he is. Let him drag me up in front of La-La with his lying accusation, and then show everybody what a phony he is, and that the real bracelet is perfectly safe."

Peewee allows his eyes to close for a moment and then opens them.

"Where does he keep the thing?"

"In his apartment, I imagine."

"Where in his apartment?"

"How do I know? In some weasely hiding place, no doubt."

"How do we get in?"

"Don't ask me. You're the burglar. All I can do is give you his address. After that you're on your own. You can give me a ring when the job is done."

She holds out the bracelet, grips it tight for a moment as if having second thoughts, then drops it into his little hand.

In the elevator, I feel Peewee's eyes on me, even though he's staring at the button marked EMERGENCY. He's blaming me for this, I know it. If I was smaller, he would probably turn on me. But how could I have predicted such a turn of events? How could I have known what Ms. Preene had planned?

White Shark is still hulking in the lobby. He has his feet propped up on a filigreed table, and a sports magazine is fanned out in his hands. We walk past him, taking shallow breaths until we are safely back out on the street again.

Peewee sets out briskly along the pavement. The sound he makes is an irritable one, his pants *swik-swik-swikking* with a particularly harsh sort of din. "So," he says, "here's what it's come to. I ask you

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for help, and what do you do to me? You land me in even worse trouble. If I was in the soup up to my neck before, I am in it up to my nostrils now. White Shark! I was trying to avoid that guy. Now I have to steal a diamond bracelet from him. Is this what you call help?"

"Life is funny sometimes."

"Well, I'm not laughing!"

I could tell him I never promised anything. He is behaving as if he did *me* a favor, showing up at the Westbrook and dumping his worldly woes on me. He's ignoring the fact that I am now in the soup with him, when all I was trying to do was vacuum a rug.

"Maybe," I suggest, "it was those pants."

"I don't see what my pants have to do with it!"

"They might have everything to do with it. There's a good chance they're what gave you away. Loud pants. Ms. Preene could have heard you burgling her, then waited in the lobby for someone with loud pants to go by."

He appears to consider this, then shakes it off.

The address Ms. Preene has sent us to is certainly not the lap of luxury. It is an ugly building with peeling paint. A large unreadable graffito has been slathered across the door. It's on East Street, a block from the Corona Hotel, which incidentally is where Peewee swiped the gewgaw in the first place and brought all of this trouble down on us. We mount the stairs and find that the door in question has more locks on it than the Tower of London.

"What do we do now?" Peewee asks.

I give him a shrug and jerk my thumb at the roof.

From the roof there is a panoramic view of pointy rooftops and the Acme wrecking yards. There is a sixteen story drop to a row of trash bins, which might possibly break a person's fall but would probably also break all of their bones. Approaching the abyss for a gander, I see White Shark's balcony just three yards below us and a little to the left. I see a plastic patio table with a large decorative platter in the middle of it; also a barbecue and a couple of chairs.

"We should jimmy his door," Peewee says. "It's safer."

I notice he has slipped dark glasses on, a pair of very large gold-rimmed mafias which he seems to think will keep him incognito. He should know that nothing short of invisibility could ever have that effect on him.

"You saw his door," I remind him. "You saw the locks on it. You'd be jimmying till this time Tuesday. Now here's what we do. You ease out over the edge and let yourself dangle. Then you should be

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able to swing over far enough to drop square in the middle of his deck."

"Do you think I'm some kind of circus performer?"

"No—"

"I would have to hang on by my fingernails!"

"Which you'll never be able to do again if La-La Lloyd decides to have them permanently removed."

Peewee reflects on that possibility, then reluctantly agrees to give it a shot. "But you are going to have to guide me. You're going to have to tell me where my feet are."

With my assistance, he gets down on the tarmacadam, and then stretches out very flat on his stomach. He then inches backward, squirming, until his legs are thrust out over the void.

"Keep going," I tell him.

"What do you mean, 'keep going'?"

"You've got to move a little further out."

"If I move any further out I will be defying the law of gravity!"

"You have to get your whole body out there."

"You want me to levitate?"

"You need room to swing yourself, so that you can let yourself go."

"And you need to have your head examined! Get out of the way. I'm coming back in!"

The problem, which I might have foreseen, of course, is that Peewee is just a little too short. Still, we can't back out of it now. The situation calls for immediate action. Reaching down, I take a hold of his collar, then brace myself and give a sudden strong heave. The force drags him clear of the building. Then I maneuver him, swing him out over White Shark's deck, take careful aim and let him go. Peewee lets out a screeching sound, but lands nicely in the middle of the table, which unfortunately buckles and tilts toward the railing. The decorative platter, with him in the middle of it, makes a sudden rush for the balcony's edge, but at the last moment leaves the tabletop and dumps him safely under a chair.

"Get your breath back," I call down to him lying there groaning, "then go inside and open the door for me."

When he opens the door he looks none too cheerful. Not only that, he's in a bit of a mess. There is some kind of grunge down the front of his coat, and he has a welt on his face shaped like part of the railing. The toe of one shoe is bent upwards, having somehow parted from the sole, and his sunglasses are gone.

"Here's some advice," I tell him. "Be more careful."

"And here's some for you," he snarls. "Don't go to sleep tonight without a gun in your hand!" He jabs his thumb at the arrangement of locks on the door. "Do you know how many of these were

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actually latched? Only one of them. The doorknob!"

You try and help a guy.

We get to work and begin to search the place. I want to go through the rooms in record time. I'm not sure how Peewee feels about it, but I'm concerned White Shark might suddenly walk in on us. It could easily happen, since we have no one to jig for us, which is to say a guy out by the stairwell keeping an eye skinned for danger.

I tackle the living room, starting high and working downward. I pluck pictures off the wall to inspect the backs of them: a very large one of a Harley-Davidson with actual little bright winking lights; a glossy image of a Lamborghini; and one of a spider monkey on a bicycle, holding a human skull and peddling frantically. Cheesy-modern is the style.

Suddenly, Peewee lets out a yelp.

He's in the dining room, squatting under the table, and he now duck-waddles out from under it with a packet clutched in his little hand. The packet has strips of packing tape dangling from it which had been holding it to the table's underside. "I found it!" he crows proudly. "I found it! It was under the table. She wasn't kidding us!"

He pulls the packet open, and a diamond bracelet falls out. It is exactly like the one he has in his pocket.

It's the work of a moment to exchange the two, then replace the packet and beat it for the door.

Heading for home, I am in good humor. And why not. We have accomplished our task. And it isn't everyone, after all, who can burgle White Shark and emerge unscathed. Peewee, however, is not so gleeful. For him it has been a demanding day. There is a shiner forming under his eye where the welt is, he has dust bunnies sticking to the grunge on his coat, and his damaged loafer is flapping against the street.

"What's the matter?" I ask him.

"I thought we would learn something."

"We got through that ordeal in one piece, didn't we?"

"We got through today," he points out, "but what about tomorrow? And we still have the gewgaw in our possession, in case you had forgotten."

I don't know what's eating him. He should be rejoicing. Instead, he is behaving as if he is still in the soup.

"You're a wet blanket," I tell him. "A killjoy. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Soon we can put this ugly business behind us and begin to enjoy our lives again."

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But it's not going to be that simple. Ms. Preene is not ready to take delivery. We call her apartment from the first pay phone we come across, but the only human voice we hear—and it is not so human after all—is that of her maid telling us Ms. Preene has a hair appointment and will not be available until further notice.

"Well," says Peewee, scowling. "How about that!" Standing on tiptoes, he replaces the receiver and remains there for a moment staring at it. "Why do you suppose she would leave such orders when we are sure to have news for her of a significant kind?"

It's a very good question.

Back at the Westbrook, Peewee cleans himself up a bit. The welt is pretty much gone—it was mostly dirt—and on his feet in place of the damaged oxfords he wears an old pair of dogs with red lightning bolts embossed on the sides. He has exchanged his soiled coat for a bulky red-knit sweater.

He tries Ms. Preene's number again; it is much later now and the hair appointment must be over, but this time he is told that she is playing bridge at her club, and won't be available for the rest of the day.

"I don't get it!" he snaps, getting into a state again. "We have a bracelet of hers that is worth a fortune, and it's as if she couldn't care less about it. The way she was talking there in her apartment, I thought she was desperate to get it back into her hot little hands."

"I'm sure she'll give you a call first thing in the morning. She knows who you are, after all. She's got your particulars."

"Yes, and that's what worries me."

He flops on his couch. "All this hustling around. I'm exhausted. And these pants are starting to give me a rash."

His rash is not the subject of discussion when he struggles into the kitchen nook next day. It's already mid morning and he has not received a single communication from Ms. Preene. He calls her again while Rosie pours him some coffee, and learns that she has legged it away to her weekly gym class.

"I don't understand the woman!" he mutters, exasperated.

"You've left messages?"

"Of course."

"Asking her to phone you here?"

"Where else?"

I ponder this. I give it some careful thought. It is one more thing about the situation that does not seem quite right to me. Why does White Shark live in such penury? Why was the bracelet so inexpertly hidden? But most of all, why has Ms. Preene become so unconcerned about her bracelet? I'm beginning to smell some-

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thing, and it isn't flowers, dried or otherwise. A thought suddenly occurs to me.

"Have you got the merchandise with you?"

He nods.

"Come on, then." I reach for my jacket. "There is something I think we have got to find out."

With Peewee growling about missing his breakfast, we set out from the Westbrook for a place that I know. This is a cellar at the corner of Winnipeg Avenue, where lurks a wizened gnome called Clive Lechance. Now Clive, as it happens, is a bit of a rumkin, which is to say a guy who does not fit in very well. But he is also a jeweler of sorts. One of those jewelers who ply their trade in basements, never venturing out in the sun. But if there is one thing Clive knows, it's diamonds. He takes that thing they call a loupe, bunches his eye around it, and examines the gewgaw.

"Junk," he pronounces, flinging it back at us. "That'll be fifty dollars."

"You're sure?" I ask.

"A second opinion will cost another fifty dollars."

As Peewee reluctantly extracts the money from his wallet, Clive goes back to carefully shaving a microscopic sliver of gold from a ring he has been resetting, a sliver he will add to thousands of others collected over the years to support his inevitable retirement.

"I can't believe it," Peewee moans, as we trudge back up the creaking stairs. "If this is a fake, then . . ."

"Then what we left at White Shark's must be the real Johnson," I say, finishing the thought for him.

"But how *can* it be the real Johnson?" Peewee is holding the bracelet in front of his face and gawping at it, as we proceed back home along the pavements. "If that's the case, then Ms. Preene made an error. Somehow she got things turned around. And if she did, then—"

"Then she will insist on us returning to White Shark's and going through the entire procedure again. Or . . ."

"Yes?"

"Or Ms. Preene knew exactly what she was doing and deliberately used us to plant the real item in that suite."

That idea gets his wheels turning again. He begins thinking so hard about it, I can almost see heat waves coming off his balding head.

"I will sum up for you," I tell him, "the questions so far. How come she is so little interested in getting a costly bracelet back under lock and key? Why is it more important to play cards, go to hairdressers and do exercises? Is this how a woman treats her valu-

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able possessions? A woman who, as she says, *loves* her jewelry? And even more to the point, is this how a worried woman treats the item that she claims will deliver her from La-La's wrath?"

Peewee's brief attempt at logical thinking seems to have given him a severe pain. "This business," he says, "hurts my head. What is the woman up to? And why?"

"I don't know," I tell him. "But we'd better find out. If we are being set up for something, we had better know what it is."

There is no especially attractive recourse. There are only a couple of things we can do. We can put a watch on Ms. Preene's apartment, follow her when she emerges and hope to learn something, or we can put a watch on White Shark's apartment with the same idea in mind.

We decide to do both.

There is a park not far from Ms. Preene's building, complete with benches, one of which will suit us. This will be my post. And across the road from White Shark's, fifty yards from the wrecking yard fence, there is a diner with window seats that offer a view of his place. This will be Peewee's.

And so we wait.

For the first few hours of our vigil there is little to report. Ms. Preene returns from her grunt-and-gasp class with White Shark dogging her heels. She disappears into her swank apartment and leaves her nemesis to skulk in the lobby, which has got to be hard on poor, old White Shark. It is a very fine lobby, but it has limited amenities. Still, his perseverance is to be admired. He has the devotion of a cloistered monk. As the day progresses into late afternoon, I make my third call to Peewee from a nearby payphone.

"Any action?" I ask.

"No, still nothing. People come and go, but that's to be expected. All very seedy characters, very down-at-heel."

"We'll give it another hour."

"That'll be pushing it. The guy who runs this place is looking round the corners of his eyes at me. And if I drink one more cup of his coffee, I will have to visit the hospital and have my stomach lining replaced. As for his donuts, listen—"

He rattles on.

I am reflecting on those "seedy characters." There is certainly something very much wrong with this picture. Again I wonder, can this be the home of one of La-La's wise guys? It does not seem so very likely to me.

On an impulse, I decide to try something. I will make an attempt

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to stir things up. Advising Peewee to sit tight, I hang up on him and dial Ms. Preene's hotel.

"I have a message for the guy in your lobby."

"What gentleman are you referring to, sir?"

"I'm referring to the loogan who sits there every day, showing his big white teeth and scaring your customers away. Tell him you just received a hot tip—his apartment is being robbed."

Then I sit back and await results. It is a message White Shark cannot ignore no matter what his instructions from on high may be. And sure enough, a minute later, he rushes into the street for a cab.

I grab one myself and take off in pursuit.

Does White Shark head for the Acme wrecking yard? No, he does not. Instead, his taxi barrels uptown, and near the Forks pulls up at the Kennedy Castle, which is a very plush and exclusive joint where numerous others of La-La's acquaintance reside. This, at least, makes a little more sense to me.

I locate a phone. Peewee picks up immediately.

"Where have you been?" he complains. "I've got some very weird action here. Ms. Preene just arrived and bustled straight into the building!"

This is indeed surprising. Then I give him my news.

"So unless," I add, "White Shark has two separate residences, Ms. Preene has misled us yet again."

"I can't take much more! What is she up to?"

"If we knew that, we'd know everything. I'll be there shortly."

"Here's exactly what happened," Peewee tells me, dragging me into the empty diner by the elbow and backing me into a booth. "Ms. Preene comes tearing up in a cab, and she's got one of those little wheeled travel bags with her. The cabbie lifts it out, and she drags it across the street to the apartment building. And then things get even more interesting. A guy I never saw before in my life bursts out the door and gives her a great big smack."

"What! He hits her?"

"No. He kisses her."

"Well. Her brother maybe."

"Oh no! This is no brotherly kiss. He lifts her off her feet and holds her in the can't-live-without-you position for a good ten seconds. When he finally sets her down, both of them happy as ticks, they leg it over to that little Chevy parked at the curb over there, and shove her travel bag into the trunk. Then they scoot into the building. They're in there now." Peewee flings another glance out the window, then fixes his drooping, red-rimmed eyes on me. "If I

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didn't know better, I would say they are skipping out. That's how the whole thing looks to me."

This is indeed precisely how it looks. And if true, we will be in serious trouble. La-La will certainly not be pleased. He will do some significant snooping round. He will quickly get a line on Peewee and send some loogans to find him and haul him in. And if Peewee gets hauled in, there is no doubt that I'll be hauled in right behind him.

Perhaps Peewee arrives at this conclusion himself, for at this moment, he does something surprising. He steps to the phone and dials the Lalapaloosa Club.

Now the Lalapaloosa Club, as everyone knows, is La-La Lloyd's center of operations. For a guy in Peewee's position to call that number is a very amazing development indeed. Turning his back on me and cupping his hand over his mouth, he babbles excitedly into the handset. I hear nothing of what he is saying except for one name, "Hightops," who I know is La-La's top lieutenant. He looks sheepish as he hangs up the phone and says mysteriously, "Well, that's it, that's as far as I can take it. Time to call in the Marines."

I don't know what to say. He won't elaborate. The minutes tick by and he paces the room, his little trousers *swik-swik-swikking.* Every few moments, he stops to take a look out the window. The guy at the counter asks if we want some coffee, and Peewee tells him with unnecessary sharpness that if we do we'll send out for it. Then he jumps.

"Take a look at that!"

It's Ms. Preene and her Romeo, arm-in-arm, exiting the building. They are smiling and confabulating happily, the guy fetching along his own wheeled suitcase, which is large enough to accommodate all of a traveling man's worldly possessions, and then some.

Peewee is practically dancing in the air. "Jeez!" he moans, as if the two are already disappearing from sight.

The Romeo mutters something that must be humorous, for Ms. Preene playfully punches his arm. Even at this distance, I see the flash of the sparkling bauble that is clasped around her wrist.

They shove the bag in the Chevy and bump their gums awhile, apparently arguing over who will drive.

"Come on! Come *on!*" Peewee pleads, as if the Marines will hear him through extrasensory perception.

And perhaps they do, for at that moment Hightops arrives, and we are both out the door running. We pile into the back of his Lincoln at a scramble. "There!" Peewee brays, gesticulating. "Across the street! That little Chevy!"

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The car in question is already in motion, its acceleration neatly slamming its trunk lid shut. Ms. Preene is at the wheel. Knowing Hightops's car when she sees it, she has suddenly found a new urgency.

Hightops pulls a rubber-burning U-turn, cutting off a pizza van and a bus. Only then do I notice who's sitting beside him. None other than White Shark himself.

**By this time, I have concluded that I will not leave the car alive. I will be extracted from it by technicians wielding jacks and crowbars.**

Unlike us, Hightops and White Shark look entirely relaxed, as if they're out for a pleasant drive in the country. But this isn't the country. Far from it. This is as busy a road as you are likely to find. Hightops puts his foot down very hard and soon we are moving at a breathtaking speed. Up ahead, the Chevy veers onto Logan, its rear tires sideswiping the median, giving off a shower of sparks and a glittering wheel cover. We make the same turn ourselves, but Hightops keeps all four wheels on the road. He is obviously an experienced speeder.

Ms. Preene runs a light at Weston and roars toward Keewatin. She takes a level crossing so fast that all four wheels of the Chevy leave the ground.

By this time, I have concluded that I will not leave the car alive. I will be extracted from it very shortly by technicians wielding jacks and crowbars.

Peewee, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be alarmed at all. Not by the car chase, nor by the presence of White Shark. He is jumping up and down on the seat cushions, thrusting his head into the front and urging Hightops forward by pounding on the back of his headrest.

"If you don't control yourself," Hightops informs him, screeching through a filling station lot and sending a gas jockey running, "I will get White Shark to throw you out the window."

Peewee stops hammering but keeps on jumping. "They took that left! Hurry! Get them!"

The fugitives suddenly alter their strategy. Failing to outpace us, they plunge down a side street. Taillights swaying, they round onto Worth, and braking hard, dive into an alley. Reaching the same spot, we find that the Chevy has already left the far end.

Hightops guns it. The alley ends at an intersection. The Chevy is now considerably ahead of us, swinging onto yet another street.

"Go to Logan!" Peewee howls. "Head them off!"

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We roar straight ahead to Logan, leaving a fortune in smoking rubber behind. And luck is with us this time, for there is the Chevy, just bursting from the alley.

And here is where Ms. Preene goofs.

So startled is she at our appearance, she gives a very unwise tug at the wheel. This is not a good idea. She loses control. The Chevy jumps the curb and plunges through the dusty storefront of the Bambhang Quick Pawn and Jewelry Emporium. We are still rolling as White Shark springs from the car and bounds through the shattered glass. He jerks open the driver's door of the Chevy, fending off Ms. Preene, the Romeo, and Bambhang himself, who is yammering and screeching at him, then he turns and dashes back to the Lincoln and Hightops drives us all away.

The gewgaw dangles from the stem of the rearview mirror, swaying and glittering in the afternoon sun.

"So," Mao Chao, the Westbrook front deskman, calls jovially across the lobby at us, "You guys ready to row?"

Peewee scowls at him. "Ready to what?"

"Ready to *roll*," I translate. "Word has gotten around. He's asking if we're ready to go in there and face the music."

By "in there" I am referring to the dining room, which has been taken over temporarily by Hightops. With him is the ever-present White Shark and a crew of handpicked loogans. He has sent the two of us a summons.

The room is lit only by tiny wall lamps with pointy candle bulbs and tartan shades. Several tables have been shoved together to form a single one that is twelve feet long. Hard faces glower at us. I see Charlie Athens, One Lung Kroeker, Boy Michael, and Stoplight Jones. Also Moe Fitz, Lofty Little, and Abe Aurilias with his little cigar. Ape Arms Getz is struggling out of his coat. All in all, a very serious gathering.

At the head of the table, of course, is Hightops, and right beside him sits White Shark, showing his teeth. I am almost certain that his left incisor throws back light for an instant like a switchblade.

"So who is going to do the talking?" Hightops demands, his knotted brows arching into one dark V.

Peewee opens his mouth, but thinks better of it, and gives me a jab in the thigh with his pointy elbow. So I take a deep breath and explain to them about the error, and Peewee's attempt to return the ill-gotten merchandise. I tell of Ms. Preene's claim she was being victimized, and of our misguided attempt to assist her. Finally I tell of our suspicions, and of our observations at the apartment.

"Peewee," Hightops explains for the benefit of the others,

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"observes a joe taking unexpected liberties. Liberties which Ms. Preene does not object to."

Moe Fitz lifts his head. "Hold on. Back up a minute. Why does she need these two guys in the first place?"

"She was bottled up good in her hotel," Hightops explains. "Not even a mouse could squeak by." I notice he doesn't comment on how she made her final dash for freedom; I notice also that no one asks him about it. "She needed these guys to deliver the merchandise, and to wear the jacket if things did not go well."

"Hmm," says Moe, with lidded eyes.

Hightops says, "We were very suspicious of her. It is why we made White Shark her bodyguard. If I told you how many aliases she's had, how many guys she has swindled, how much dough she has jacked out of them, you wouldn't believe it. La-La truly is well rid of her."

There is a wave of indignant approval, a guttural walla-walla in the room, until Hightops waves it down.

He looks at us.

"You brought the fake?"

Peewee digs out the gewgaw and shoves it at me. I pass it to Moe Fitz, who gives it to Stoplight Jones, and it makes its way thusly, hand over hand along the table to Hightops, who holds it as if it is something unpleasant before dropping it into his jacket pocket.

I glance at the Dutch windmill wall clock, where the seconds of our lives are ticking away.

Hightops looks at me. "Is there something else?"

"No. It's just that—well—with all of the guys you brought along with you here, I thought—"

"I got no idea what you are talking about," Hightops replies in dismissive tones. "We are here today for the chicken and ribs."

So there I am the next day, down in the lobby again, vacuuming the tattered rug. My mind is going in circles, trying to fathom things out. This time the vacuuming isn't helping me think. Suddenly, who should step through the door but Peewee Dyck. Looking very ha-ha and Bob's your uncle he toddles over and pulls the plug. "Well," he remarks, as the noise dwindles, "not much has changed with you, I see."

But it has with him. All new clothing. From the tweed wedgie on the top of his head down to the glossy oxfords on his two little feet. His new gray trousers are especially fine, with creases sharp enough to be dangerous, and a very silent woolen softness about them.

He beams proudly, "I bought a new wardrobe with the bonus I got."

Bonus?

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"La-La was so impressed at the way I handled things, he decided to pay me a little extra."

I let this sink in.

"Are you telling me—?"

"Oops." He grins. "Looks like I misspoke myself. Now I suppose I'll have to tell you the rest of it."

"That would be nice."

"The fact is," he says, "I was working for Hightops. As you heard at the meeting, he knew Ms. Preene was up to something. I was the one he sent to get to the bottom of it, and I was about out of time, and getting desperate. So I came to you."

"Are you saying you didn't swipe the gewgaw?"

"Oh sure, I did that, all right. I followed Ms. Preene to the Corona, then slipped into her rooms. I was hoping to learn what she was doing there. I grabbed the gewgaw without thinking. It didn't help me much."

"You said you were scared of La-La. And White Shark."

"I was. I am. They were threatening me."

"You lied."

"No, not really."

"You were lying to me the whole time."

"I may have misled you a little." He moves to the door—silently. "What do you think of my new pants?"

But I'm not interested in his pants. I watch him go out the door and climb into an Oldsmobile piloted by White Shark. I listen to the two of them laugh. I watch them drive away. I plug the machine back in and start vacuuming. I can't see the crud, but I know it's there.

## CONVERSATION WITH

### JAS. R. PETRIN

*Mr. Petrin has been entertaining* AHMM *readers since 1985, with his first short story, "The Smile" (9/85). He has since published more than fifty short stories in our pages. Mr. Petrin recently retired from the Manitoba Telephone Company to Halifax, Nova Scotia.*

**AHMM:** You grew up in Winnipeg—how does your hometown inspire or inform your stories?

**JRP:** I was raised in Weston, a working class area between the CPR rail yards, the Dominion Bridge steel plant, and the Air Canada maintenance shops. So the kids I grew up with came mostly from blue collar families. I think the characters and city locations in my La-La Lloyd stories reflect this.

**AHMM:** Can you tell us about the characters in the story in this issue? What interests you about them?

**JRP:** Peewee is a composite of a lot of the guys I met when I worked

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in bars. A tough guy with self-confidence issues. Fear of La-La Lloyd keeps Peewee and those like him in line, a guy even tougher than they are.

**AHMM:** The characters in these stories operate in the orbit of La-La Lloyd. How did you come up with this setting for these stories? How do you view the role of La-La Lloyd in this world?

**JRP:** The setting essentially sprang from the Winnipeg I grew up in. It isn't the Winnipeg of today—the city has changed tremendously since I was a kid. As for La-La, he is a stabilizing influence, a counterweight to the tough guys, who, without him, would run riot.

**AHMM:** This series features an unnamed narrator who acts as a kind of fixer. Why have you chosen to leave him nameless?

**JRP:** I use an unnamed narrator as a kind of "everyman"—someone any reader can identify with, especially those of us who been called upon to bail out someone who really deserves to be in the mess they are in.

**AHMM:** Chief Robideau (now retired) is the central character in another series you write, the "End of Main" stories. Where is End of Main and how did you come up with that name?

**JRP:** End of Main is a fictional town at the end of an imaginary drive north out of Winnipeg on Main Street until you are eventually blocked by the Netley Marshes. Hence, end of Main (Street). I like it because it is peopled with composites of the interesting folks I've met over the years between there and points north, an area often called the Interlake. It has farmers and commercial fishermen, and there is a strong Icelandic influence.

**AHMM:** What for you, as the writer, are the important differences between the La-La Lloyd stories and the End of Main stories?

**JRP:** The story sets are different in tone because I don't like to write in the same voice all the time. The La-La stories allow me to use the first person and the catchy, stilted dialogue of Runyonesque characters. Runyon had a terrific impact on the popular perception of urban bad guys. You can still see echoes of this in everything from The Sopranos to some Bugs Bunny cartoon characters (remember Rocky?). So the La-La stories are derivative in a tongue-in-cheek sense—each story begins in the Westbrook Hotel, which is "Donny Rumano's place"; and Donny Rumano is of course an anagram of Damon Runyon.

The End of Main stories, by contrast, are rural. The characters are more laid back and innocent, and are often astonished to find themselves mixed up with crimes and criminals. The location is the Manitoba Interlake, a region of farmers, loggers, bush pilots, and commercial fishermen, in surroundings of prairie, dense forest, bogs, limestone cliffs, lakes and sandy beaches—all the raw material a writer could want.

**AHMM:** Is humor important to you when you write?

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**JRP:** Almost all kinds of humor appeal to me, except for some of the really crude stuff. It is a part of life, from the very dry and low-key to the practically slapstick. You see all kinds almost every day, and it needs to be in fiction in all its forms.

**AHMM:** You are a musician as well as a writer. What does music mean to you personally? How does it shape your writing?

**JRP:** Music has always been tremendously important to me. I have a guitar beside my desk that I often play when I feel like a break. I think the rhythms of prose, and most especially dialogue, are musical in a fundamental sense. It may even be—I'm going out on a limb here—that the ability of some musicians to improvise or "jam" is related to creative art forms such as writing or painting.

**AHMM:** Have you ever played professionally?

**JRP:** I played guitar and bass professionally from the late sixties to the early seventies, much of that in road bands, working bars, and supper clubs between Thunder Bay on Lake Superior to Prince Rupert on the Pacific Ocean, and lots of places inbetween, both in the States and Canada. One of the highlights was meeting Bing Crosby, who had reserved an entire club—Wong's Kitchen—where we were playing. He'd been duck hunting with friends (including Jim Bachus of Mr. McGoo fame) and the club had prepared a their catch for them.

**AHMM:** What are some of the writers or experiences that have influenced your writing?

**JRP:** Early on, definitely Ray Bradbury. Also the old Ace double-cover sci-fi paperbacks—my friend Barry Warner would get these from his uncle and pass them along to me when we were about twelve. From them I learned to love melodrama. We didn't have a TV when I was a kid, something that irked me at the time, but which I am thankful for now. It got me listening to the old radio plays of those days, and they influenced me a lot—shows like *The Sealed Book*, *X-Minus One*, and lots of others. When I think of the writing, acting, and production skills necessary to make a thirty-minute radio play come alive—well, it still impresses the heck out of me.

And I'm thankful for the experiences I had in my music days. Some of them were very strange. There's almost a magic realism to that period of my life when I think about it now.

**AHMM:** You've published numerous short stories—do you have any novels on the horizon?

**JRP:** I do. I'm currently writing a Young Adult adventure novel, tentatively called *Island of the Bots* which is about a three friends, two boys and a girl, who on summer vacation are swept from normal lives into a fantastic world of sentient robots where they must confront an evil inventor. Corny, I know, but I'm trying to write something I would have loved to read when I was a kid.

Melodrama. I still love it.

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# THE SWORD OF THE BARBARIAN

## RON GOULART

He was alone in their beach cottage when the forger knocked on the front door. It was midday on a rainy Saturday in May.

Saturdays his wife drove over to Girlz Fitness in Santa Monica for her weekly tai chi class. Feeling a bit restless but not up to going out in the downpour, Wes Goodhill had decided to vacuum the house. The machine had just sucked up some gritty sand that had been tracked in from the beach just outside and was producing a protesting rattle, when someone tapped on the door.

Clicking off the vacuum cleaner, Wes crossed the living room and put one eye to the peephole.

A complete and total stranger was standing out there. Thin, pale, and in his early thirties, wearing a soggy, unzipped windbreaker.

Wes unfastened the chain and opened the door a few inches. "Yeah?"

"Is . . . Casey McLeod in?" inquired the pale man, wheezing as he spoke.

Out on the curb Wes noticed a parked Saab, old and dented. "Casey's my wife," said Wes. "Her name is Casey Goodhill now."

"Oh, that's . . . right. She . . . she told me."

"And who, exactly, are you?"

The visitor was swaying, shifting from foot to foot, looking like a man trying to master a new dance step. "Sorry . . . I'm . . . I'm her Cousin Andy . . ." He shuddered now, swayed more violently. "I came here . . . to . . . I have to pick up . . . pick. . . ."

"Hey, what's wrong?" Then the front of his jacket swung open and Wes saw the wound in the man's left side just below the shoulder. His wrinkled white shirt was bloody all around a black-rimmed hole.

"Shot . . . nothing serious . . . just want Casey to . . ." Making a



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Ron Chironna

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sad, sighing sound, the visitor slumped to his knees on the welcome mat.

"Jesus." Wes, bending, took hold of the kneeling man's right arm. "I don't know what the hell's going on, but I'll go call 911."

The wounded man reached up, taking hold of Wes's shirt sleeve. "Listen . . . tell Casey . . . she's got to hide . . . the sword of . . . the barbarian," he said, gasping in air between sentence fragments. "Be . . . careful of . . ."

"I'll leave you here while I phone the—"

"Much . . . too late." The man died all at once. He left life behind, fell forward across the cottage threshold. The body quivered, jerked a few times, produced some unsettling internal noises, and then became still and silent.

For some reason, as he dragged the dead man into the house, Wes said, "Casey never told me she had a Cousin Andy."

Getting the body all the way inside, ignoring the still open front door, Wes hurried over to the coffee table where the cell phone usually sat.

"Where the hell did Casey put it? She's always straightening up things by hiding . . . there it is."

He spotted the instrument lying face up on a small, multicolored throw rug in front of the high, wide window that afforded a view of the gray, choppy afternoon Pacific.

His thumb was poised over the 9 key when he was distracted.

What distracted Wes was someone hitting him, hard, against the temple from behind.

Losing all interest in the phone, he dropped it to the floor, and then joined it.

"Are you really sure you're okay, darling?" Casey asked, as she helped her shaky husband toward the living room sofa. "You're awfully wobbly."

"I'm all right," he assured her, settling onto the cushions. "Being wobbly is a common side effect of getting conked on the noggin."

Sitting beside him, she took his hand. "I was really scared when I got home," said the slim blonde. "The house ransacked and you sprawled on the floor."

"And a corpse in the hallway," he added, touching the bump above his ear and wincing.

Casey straightened up. "What corpse is that?"

Wes attempted to stand, then thought better of it. He gestured in the direction of the unseen hall. "Your Cousin Andy with a bullet hole in his chest."

After a perplexed sigh, Casey said, "I don't have a Cousin Andy,

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Wes, and even if I did, there's nobody lying dead in our house at the moment."

"Whoever slugged me," he said, "must've taken the body away."

He made another, and more successful effort to stand up. With Casey at his side and her arm around him, he made his tottering way to the hall.

"See," she pointed out, "no corpse of any kind."

Wes noticed that the hall closet had been opened and that two cardboard boxes, an old portfolio of his, and three badminton rackets lay on the floor near the mail table. "So somebody follows your alleged cousin here, decks me, searches our damn house, and carts the body away."

"Seems like."

He moved clear of her, his head producing internal bonging noises, and listened for a moment to the heavy rain pounding on the roof. "His car," he remembered, and opened the door.

The venerable Saab was gone.

"Then a couple of goons must've been involved," he concluded. "Because somebody had to make off with your Cousin Andy's car."

"I don't have a Cousin Andy, remember?"

Closing the door, shivering, Wes made his way back into the living room.

The bookcase had been pulled away from the wall and a stack of animation magazines had spilled across one of the bright throw rugs.

He grimaced, sat down in an arm chair. "This guy also had a message for you, Case."

"You mean like in a mystery novel? A dying message?" Settling onto the sofa, she crossed her long legs.

"It sounded more like a warning, sort of," Wes told her. "Or maybe just a bit of helpful advice. Anyway, he told me to tell you to hide a weapon of some sort. A sword."

Casey inhaled sharply. "Would that have been *The Sword of the Barbarian?*"

Nodding, he answered, "That's it, yeah."

The young woman leaned back, shaking her head and sighing. "Darn," she said. "Then a lot of this *is* my fault."

Casey, elbows resting on the kitchen table, cautioned, "Now don't blow a casket. After all—"

"Gasket," he corrected. "You're telling me I'm a cuckold, and I'm supposed to remain calm?"

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"You may well be a cuckold, since I have no idea what one is," said his wife. "But if you keep yelling like a bandit, I'm never going to get around to explaining what—"

"Banshee. It's banshees that are noted for their wailing." He was scowling across the table at her, ignoring the cup of hot cocoa sitting at his place. "The point is, the cause of my unease is the fact that you admit to having had an affair with this spurious, and now deceased, cousin of yours."

She sighed. "I don't think, Wes, that sharing a ratty apartment in North Hollywood with a fellow for about three weeks constitutes an affair," she told him. "Not in the classical sense."

"Right, not in the Madame Bovary sense, not in the Lady Chatterley—"

"Anyway, you and I have only been married six months, and I was briefly associated with Andrew Stebbins . . . it was, oh, five years ago."

"As I recall, and I'll have to check my memoirs to confirm it, we lived together for several years before we officially wed."

She sighed once more. "This occurred, dear, during one of those periods when you tossed me out in the snow, figuratively speaking, and finding myself alone in the world, I clutched at whatever straw presented—"

"*You* moved out. No tossing by me ever occurred."

"I guess I was a little more temperamental in those days," she admitted. "What I did was move in with an old friend until I came to my senses."

"And what was this Andrew guy in real life? A garage mechanic? A biker, a pest exterminator?"

"Actually, he was in the same field as you, Wes. Andy was an animator."

"Never heard of him."

"He was a very good background artist and worked for a couple of the big outfits. Bluth, for one," Casey explained. "You know, when an animated character strolls through the woods, it would be woods that Andy had—"

"Let's get to the part that explains why he died on our front stoop and why I got bopped on the sconce."

"Well, for the past two or three years Andy's had a sort of new profession."

"You've kept in touch with the guy?"

She shook her head. "No, not at all. Far as I was concerned, Andrew Stebbins was so much water under the dam."

"Over," he corrected. "So how come he was posing as your cousin and, I assume, storing a sword with us?"

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"I ran into him, just by chance, at an art supply house in Santa Monica," she replied. "About three months back."

"But you never told me."

"Hey, do you inform me every time you bump into some old girlfriend of yours?"

"All of my old girlfriends are probably incarcerated in various public institutions. I never run into any of them. If, however, I did, I would most certainly let you—"

"I'm truly sorry that you're overly sensitive about men I knew in bygone days," she said. "Now let me explain this mess I think we're now in because of Andy."

"Okay, that would be helpful, Casey." He hooked a forefinger in the handle of the cocoa mug.

"For quite a while Andy earned his living as a copyist."

"Copying what?"

"He specializes in making very accurate and believable copies of popular paperback covers—artists like Frank Frazetta and Leo Hammond," she told him. "You know, artists who specialized in covers for swords and sorcery novels years ago. What a lot of people don't realize is that the original paintings sell for tidy sums nowadays."

"I know, yeah. A Hammond went for three hundred thou' at a Christie's auction in Manhattan back in January."

"Exactly, Wes. After Hammond died in 2002, the prices for his original cover paintings shot up even higher."

"So what did your friend do? Forge swords and sorcery cover paintings and try to pass them off as authentic?"

She frowned. "Well, no," she answered. "At least, I don't think so. What he did was turn out handsome copies and sell them at sci-fi and comics conventions for a thousand bucks or so. Andy always signed his name to the copies. Fans who couldn't afford a real Frazetta or a real Hammond were happy, and he made a living at it."

Wes decided to take a sip of his cocoa, which was barely warm now. Then he asked, "So what's *The Sword of the Barbarian?* A cover painting?"

"Right, it was the one Hammond did back in the early 1960s for the first Botok the Barbarian paperback reprint. You know, the old pulp character by Rodlow E. Hammersmith," she said. "It was lost for decades, but turned up late last year."

"Wait now," said her husband. "How do you come into this?"

"He had me store a painting," she said quietly.

He frowned across at her. "A copy he made, huh?"

Casey shook her head. "I'm starting to think it was the original."

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"How the hell did he get hold of that?"

"From the few conversations I had with him, I got the idea that some unscrupulous dealer who had the original asked him to make a couple of copies. Working from the original instead of the paperback cover, Andy could turn out a nearly undetectable forgery," she said. "The dealer could sell one of the copies and pretend it was the original. If he was clever enough he might be able to sell two or three copies as the original and still keep it."

"You had the original painting stored here for a while?"

Casey said, "Andy told me it was an extra copy he'd made for himself. But, considering what's happened, it must've been the real Hammond."

"Exactly why did you agree to keep anything in our house for this guy, Casey?"

"He told me that the girl he was living with was given to tantrums and had threatened a few times to slash his paintings."

"Why you? He could've put the damn thing in a storage warehouse."

"He told me he didn't want too many people to know about it. I was an old friend, somebody he figured he could trust," she said. "And keep in mind, Wes, that if it was actually the original and he was stealing it from the dealer, he had to stick it someplace safe."

"You should've told me we had a painting hidden here."

"I know, sure," she acknowledged. "But since you have a tendency to doubt my word, I didn't think you'd believe I was merely doing a favor for a friend, and suspect that—"

"The reason I sometimes tend to doubt your word, Casey, is because in the past you have concocted colossal untruths and tried to pass them off as—"

"That's all over and I've reformed," she reminded him. "More or less."

"Okay," he said. "Where did you stash the painting?"

"It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. Andy dropped it off last week while you were at work at the animation studio," she answered. "I hid it under the bed."

"Our bed? The one we share each and every night?"

"The bed in our bedroom, yes."

"That's no doubt what the chap who coldcocked me was searching for," he said. "I assume the package is no longer there."

"No, I looked while you were coming out of your stupor," she said, and then smiled. "But he didn't actually get the painting."

"Oh, no?"

"What he got was a decoy package," she told her husband. "I had this hunch that what Andy had left was more valuable than he

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pretended. So I made up a mock package in case anybody tried to swipe it. And moved the real painting to another location."

"This is all conjecture, Case. You really don't know if this thing was a fake or—"

"Nobody'd kill poor Andy over a phony cover painting," she said, ticking off items on her fingers. "Nobody'd smack you on the skull over a phony cover painting. Nobody'd ransack our cozy beachside home over a phony cover painting. Nobody'd steal a phony cover painting from under our bed."

"Possibly," he conceded, pausing to drink the rest of the now cold cocoa. "Oh, by the way, why did he claim he was your cousin."

"He no doubt suspected your overly protective attitude toward me," she suggested. "Had poor Andy come to the door and said something like, 'Hi there, I'm Andrew Stebbins, and I shacked up with your wife in days gone by, and now I'd like to retrieve a painting that she's got secreted under your nuptial bed and probably hasn't told you a darn thing about. Okay?' you'd no doubt have tossed him out on his fanny."

"Probably so. I am easily upset."

Casey reached across the table and took hold of her husband's hand. "All right, okay. I should've maybe confided in you about what was going on. I'm sorry, Wes."

"When the folks who made off with your dummy package open it, they are going to come back," he said. "What we have to do is retrieve *The Sword of the Barbarian* cover painting, turn it over to the police, and tell them what's been happening. Otherwise, we may end up in a condition similar to that of Cousin Andy."

"Um," said Casey quietly, taking back her hand and looking away from him.

"What now?"

"Well," she said, stretching out the word. "You're going to be angry when I tell you where I moved the painting to."

"But your father," Wes was saying from the passenger seat as Casey guided their red Toyota up into the rainswept hills above Hollywood. "Your father is known far and wide as the prince of thieves, the king of con men, the grifter's grifter, the—"

"He is, trust me, on a sabbatical," said Casey, who was hunched slightly in the driver's seat. "Admittedly, my dad has entangled us in some enterprises that were a trifle shady, but this time he's promised me to be on his best behavior."

"A *trifle* shady? Erle Stanley McLeod, from whom I suspect you inherited your skill for bending the truth, has involved us in capers that got you kidnapped, put both our lives in jeopardy, caused—"

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"We'll just drop by this place where he's housesitting," cut in Casey, "collect the painting, and—"

"Why is he even in the country? I thought he was still hiding out in Lima or Rio or some other such garden spot where the minions of the law couldn't find him."

Casey sighed. "Apparently, things grew a bit too risky for him in South America," she explained, as the car went splashing uphill. "So he slipped back into California. An old friend asked him to look after her mansion up here in Beverly Hills while she's in Europe."

"That's another of your dear old dad's specialties," said Wes, watching the wipers fight against the heavy rain that was slamming at the windshield, "romancing wealthy women. Honestly, Casey, I don't understand why you keep allowing him back into your life when—"

"It must be my sentimental side."

"You failed to warn me he was lurking in Southern California. I could've sprinkled holy water on the doorstep, fashioned a necklace of garlic to wear at night, stocked up on silver bullets, and—"

"Okay, enough. I get the point, dear," said Casey. "I didn't mention that Dad arrived in town last month because I knew it would upset you."

He nodded. "It would've, yeah," he said. "And now it has."

"Well, he'll be leaving for Canada in a week or so."

"But in the meantime, he's sitting on a painting that may be worth three or four hundred thousand bucks."

"Here's how I figured it, Wes. He's staying all by himself in this enormous house—twenty-six rooms, not counting the six bathrooms. There's plenty of places in the mansion to hide a painting and nobody knows he's in town. So they can't connect him with me in any way. It seemed like a safe place to keep a—"

"To keep a stolen picture."

"Stolen or not, it's safer up here than it was down at our place, Wes."

"I'm trying to pick the right folk saying to apply here," he said, as the car climbed higher into the hills. "Right now I favor, 'This is like hiring the fox to guard the henhouse.' Putting your larcenous father in charge of a valuable painting is—"

"Dad would never steal from me," she assured him.

"Maybe," he said, after a moment.

The hillside mansion looked like a not-quite successful merger between an old California mission and a Moorish fortress.

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Hurrying up the rain-spattered flagstone path, they heard exuberant jazz piano music drifting out of the big sprawling house.

"Dad's playing his Thelonious Monk medley." Casey smiled.

"I noticed."

A few seconds after Casey poked the doorbell beside the redwood door, the music inside halted.

Casey's tall, lean father opened the door wide. "Honey, what a pleasant surprise." Just now he had a deep suntan and his gray hair was short-cropped. "Accompanied by my favorite son-in-law."

"I'm your *only* son-in-law," Wes pointed out as he followed his blond wife across the threshold and into the mosaic-tiled hall.

"That may account for it." Erle Stanley McLeod led them into a vast, beam-ceilinged living room that was dominated by a white grand piano.

"From the sound of it, you haven't had time to have that thing tuned," observed Wes.

"Boys," Casey suggested, sitting in a black leather chair, "we really don't have time for you two to squabble."

"Is there some trouble, pet?" asked her father from the piano bench.

"Afraid so, Dad."

"I imagine it must have something to do with that trashy painting you entrusted to me."

"How do you know what's in the package?" Wes was standing at a leaded window. Directly uphill, on the other side of a small stand of walnut trees, rose a modern gray house perched on stilts.

"My natural paternal curiosity prompted me to take a peek, son."

"Well, yes, Dad, it is about *The Sword of the Barbarian* cover painting," confirmed Casey. She then explained to her father what had been happening.

McLeod leaned back, resting his strong chin on his clasped hands. "Sounds to me as if there might be some disagreement about the provenance of this particular masterpiece."

Wes, turning his back on the storm, asked his wife, "Did Andy mention who the dealer who entrusted the painting to him was?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

Her father said, "The art dealer who owns this particular Leo Hammond cover painting is Moss Lengle. A quick search of the Internet gave me the name."

"Then he's probably the one who hired poor Andy to make a copy," said Casey. "And the one who came looking for the original when Andy didn't get around to returning it."

"Your late chum stole the true Hammond work sure enough,

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hon," said her father. "But, by asking a few questions of some of my former associates in and around Greater Los Angeles, I learned that the thing had been swiped from Lengle a good month ago."

"So who'd Andy steal it from?" asked Wes.

"That I haven't yet been able to determine," admitted McLeod, running the fingers of his right hand along the piano keys.

"Why," inquired Casey, "do you think they killed poor Andy? I mean, art theft isn't a capital crime."

Her tanned father suggested, "Your boyfriend's demise, pet, probably wasn't intended initially, but—"

"*Former* boyfriend," corrected Wes. "Stebbins, according to Casey, was completely erstwhile."

"As I was saying," continued McLeod, "the present owners of this pulpish daub no doubt tracked Stebbins down after he'd absconded, and in the subsequent confrontation, the lad managed to get shot. He was, however, able to get away and make his way to Casey's beach house to warn—"

"*Our* beach house," corrected Wes.

"And then expire," Casey's father concluded.

"But somebody was able to follow Andy," she reminded. "And when they discover that they made off with a couple of flattened out cardboard cartons, they're going to be pretty ticked off."

"What we've got to do," said Wes. "is collect the painting right now. Then, as I keep saying, turn it over to the police and make damn sure that the media spreads the news."

"But if we return it to that dealer up in San Francisco," said Casey, "he'll pay us a handsome reward."

"And while we're doing that, a horde of unspecified goons may well descend on us."

"They'd have to find us first," Casey pointed out. "If we stay clear of our house, then—"

"Too late, Mrs. McLeod." Two large, thickset men had appeared in the doorway. Both wore flamboyant Hawaiian shirts and white jeans. Both held rather dainty .22 pistols.

A third man, smaller and carrying only a knobby cane, stepped between them and moved into the room. About forty, he was thin and possessed a considerable amount of tight-curling, dead-white hair. "Amateurs," he said, smiling thinly. "A cinch following you from that tatty beach shack."

"I didn't notice anybody tailing us, did you?" Casey asked her husband.

"Nope," answered Wes.

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"That's because you're amateurs," said the man with the colorless hair. "Now tell me where my painting is."

Casey swallowed. "Well, it's here someplace."

He eased nearer to her. "Where, my dear?"

McLeod hit a few keys on the white piano. "I didn't get around to mentioning this earlier, pet," he said, when he had everyone's attention, "but, alas, my larcenous side got the better of me two days ago, and I sold the painting for a tidy sum."

Casey assumed a forlorn expression. "Honestly, Dad, I'm really disappointed in you," she said. "Here I've just been telling Wes that I trusted you implicitly to look after the cover painting, and then you go and do something like this."

"She didn't actually convert me to her point of view," mentioned Wes. Lightning crackled outside the window just behind him.

"Children, what can I say? There are simply times when needs must—"

"Enough of *Family Feud*," suggested the small man, tapping the hardwood floor with the tip of his knobby cane. "I have to point out that—"

"Well, you probably don't put as much emphasis on family as I do," cut in Casey. "Granted that my father is a thoroughgoing scoundrel at times, still you expect a parent to be paternal to the extent of—"

"Cease prattling." He moved closer to McLeod, studying him with narrowed eyes. "Somehow, sir, I find myself doubting your word. I believe it's still here someplace."

"I'm telling the truth," asserted McLeod. "At this moment the stolen painting is safely elsewhere."

"What we'll do is search this place thoroughly, top to bottom," the whitehaired man said. "Should we not locate it, though I'm certain we shall, I'll return to question you all further."

"The nature of my transaction being what it was," said Casey's father, "I have no idea where this dubious masterpiece has gotten to by now."

Pointing at one of the gunmen, the small man said, "You and I will hunt. Phil, stay here and watch these amateurs. Shoot anybody who makes a fuss. But not fatally."

"I'm sorry about Stebbins. I didn't intend to—"

"Come along." Cane swinging, the whitehaired man and the larger of his two associates left the big living room and were soon heard climbing upstairs.

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Thunder rumbled, sounding close. All the windows rattled. McLeod rose up for a moment, rearranged a large flowered pillow on the piano bench, then sat again. "Their hunt will prove fruitless," he assured the guard.

The husky man gestured with his .22. "We don't need any more conversation," he advised.

Again lightning flashed, turning the room a brief electric blue. Then came loud, booming thunder, and the entire mansion seemed to shudder violently.

Wes spun around, staring out the window. "My God, it's a mudslide!" he said. "That house up the hill is off its stilts and heading right for us!"

That distracted the gunman, and lowering his gun, he came running into the room. McLeod then suddenly rose and tossed the heavy pillow at him.

That knocked the gun from the gunman's hand, and immediately after that Casey tackled him.

"An admirable diversion, Wes," said McLeod, kneeling on the sprawled guard's wide back while bopping him on the skull with the handle of the pistol he'd grabbed up off the floor. "I take it we're not actually about to be struck by a runaway house."

"Nope." Wes crossed to them. "I thought I'd avail myself of the McLeod family tradition of bullshit."

"Casey, my dear," said her father as he got to his feet, "truss up this lout before he awakens. Your spouse and I will sneak upstairs and incapacitate the other two."

Casey bent, using the unconscious man's belt to secure his hands behind his back. "That was a pretty good diversion you tried on them, Dad, even if it didn't quite work" she said. "Pretending the painting wasn't here because you'd sold it."

Smiling and starting for the door, her father said, "That wasn't a lie, pet," he said. "I really did unload *The Sword of the Barbarian* cover painting two days ago."

Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

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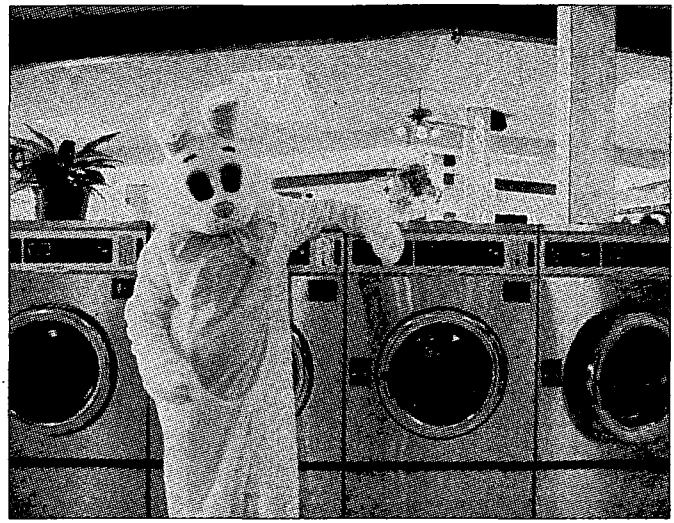
# Mysterious Photograph



*Laurie & Charles/Photonica/Getty Images*

## Bunny Laundering

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

**The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.**



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# DEATH ON A DIET

## B. K. STEVENS

"You're sure this is all you want?" he said. "Just salad and an apple?"

"I'll be working at a diet center, Sam," she said. "I can't walk in loaded with sandwiches and cookies. And maybe the place will inspire me to start a diet myself."

He looked at her incredulously. "Diet? You? Why?"

"Oh, I could stand to lose five pounds," she said. Or ten or twenty, she thought, but kept the more precise estimates to herself. Just last week, Sam had said she still looked exactly like her college pictures. It would be cruel to shatter such sweet and useful illusions. "And this diet sounds intriguing—it's based on an idea, not just a list of rules."

He shook his head. "Just another fad diet," he said.

"Not necessarily. It takes its name from an aphorism of Ben Franklin's: 'Eat to live, not live to eat.' That makes sense, doesn't it?" She walked to the refrigerator. "Now, the dough's in here. It'll be ready to roll out by the time the girls get home from school."

"Fine," Sam said, sneaking a brownie into her lunch bag. "So I'll supervise the baking, and you'll be home in time to help put the baskets together."

"Definitely." She turned to face him. "Sam, I hope the meeting with Freddy Beckett goes well. Try to get him into your gallery—show him the new miniatures. Maybe he'll buy one. He should certainly be able to afford it after that stint in Vegas."

He shrugged. "I don't think Elvis impersonators make all that much, Leah. And I don't think Freddy's interested in anything but commissioning a lawn ornament."

She nodded glumly. Sam's inability to sell his serious pieces was a long-standing frustration. "Well, it's his loss. Someday, Sam—someday. Oy—I'd better get going. Now, I've got my keys, I've got my wallet, I've got my pencil—"

"And I've got your notebook." He handed it to her and kissed her goodbye.

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MONDAY, MARCH 13, 10:30 A.M.

Mid-morning break—a chance to jot down a few notes. Arrived at the Eat-to-Live Center at 7:20 to find a slight, middle-aged man pacing in the parking lot, keeping an eye on his watch. He sighed with relief when he saw me.

"There you are," he said, ushering me into the lobby. "Leah Abrams? Filling in for Elaine? I'm James Whitman, the CFO. Are you familiar with the Eat-to-Live diet?"

"Not very," I said, "but I've seen the before-and-after—oh! There they are!"

There they were indeed, dominating an entire wall, lifesize photographs of Eliza Perkins before and after she discovered the Eat-to-Live diet and lost over two hundred pounds. In the before pictures, you could see how miserable she was—shoulders hunched forward, eyes glaring, lips tight, every ounce of her far-too-many ounces radiating anger and defensiveness. In the after pictures, what a difference—not just in the slender body, but in the confident way she held herself, in the eager eyes, in the quiet smile, in everything. "And I know the diet works," I said. "The pictures are the best proof of that."

"Yes, indeed," James said, smiling briefly. "I noticed, by the way, that your résumé says you have an MA in communications. Why are you working as a temp?"

"Temp work gives me more time with my family," I said, "and I enjoy the variety." Especially, I thought, since my specialty is workplace communication, and working at a variety of places gives me a variety of data for my books. (Note: More proof I was right to leave the PhD off the résumé. Even the M.A. makes him uncomfortable.)

"I see," he said. "Now, your duties. First, you'll do initial interviews with new clients. Call up the intake form on the computer—like this—ask them the questions, enter the information, and send them to meet with a counselor. Second, you'll—"

"I'll explain things to her, James," a slender, middle-aged woman said, taking her scarf off as she crossed the lobby to join us. "It's my job."

"I know that, Susan," he said. "But you weren't here."

"I wasn't here," she said, just barely not fuming, "because it wasn't 7:30 yet. I told Leah to come half an hour early for orientation, and here I am, ready to orient her." She shook my hand. "Welcome, Leah. I'm Susan Perkins, the Administrative Director."

"It's good to meet you," I said, and my eyes strayed back to the huge before-and-after pictures. "Susan Perkins. Are you any relation to—"

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"You bet," she said. "I'm her mom. Let's get you started. Here's your lab coat."

"Will I be doing lab work?" I said, feeling alarmed as she handed me the loose white jacket. "I don't have any medical qualifications or experience."

"No, there's no lab work, honey. The coats just make the place feel more scientific-like. Now, this is the reception desk, and these are your control panels."

"Oh, my." I looked in dismay at the array of timers and buttons and switches. I felt as if I were sitting in the cockpit of a space capsule. "It looks so complicated."

"You'll get used to it," she assured me. "These buttons are for the phonelines—they flash when a call comes in, light up steady when someone's talking. And on the right you've got intercoms and timers for the eating stations. You know how the diet works?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I've heard that it's based on the concept that eating should be viewed simply as a biological function, as a necessary means of providing the body with fuel rather than as a form of self-indulgence or a social occasion of any sort."

She thought for a moment. "Yeah, that's it. That's what Eliza discovered when she came across that monastery in Tibet. All the monks were real slim—you know how they managed that? Three times a day, they'd take trays to their rooms, eat facing a wall, finish up in ten minutes, and get right back to praying. When Eliza stayed at that monastery, all her extra weight fell off like magic, and she's kept it off ever since."

"But she doesn't still keep to that regimen, does she?" I asked. "It can't be a permanent system—not for all meals. What about sitting down to a family dinner?"

"Worst thing you can possibly do," Susan said cheerfully. "You got kids? I bet you make them lots of potatoes and pasta so they'll have energy, and lots of desserts since kids like sweet things—and then you end up eating all that stuff yourself. And you linger over meals because it's fun to be with your kids, and sometimes you have seconds. And they burn all that food right up because they're kids, but you gain weight. Right?"

"Right," I admitted. "Was that how it was for you, too?"

"Oh, well." Her eyes darkened. "Meals weren't much fun for us when Lizzie was growing up—Eliza, that is, I used to call her Lizzie. See, her dad died before she was born, and there I was—a teenager with no skills, no job experience, no husband."

"And a baby on the way," I said, imagining it. "It must have felt overwhelming."

"It felt scary as hell," she said frankly. "I worked two, three jobs

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at a time, but even so, it was hard to put food on the table for the two of us. I knew it would be hard. So I—well, I did the best I could. And if all I could afford to buy was rice and oatmeal and peanut butter, that's all she ate. No wonder the poor kid packed on the pounds. Lean meats, fresh fruits, vegetables, all the healthy stuff—we never even saw that stuff."

"Are those the sorts of foods your daughter's diet recommends?"

She shrugged. "Sort of. I mean, we got no quarrel with all that. But Eliza's main point is that as long as you follow the right system, you can eat whatever you want."

"That wouldn't work for me," I said. "If I ate whatever I want—watch out!"

"Wait till you try the system," she said. "Now, let's go see the second floor."

Most of the second floor was taken up by a gym stocked with gleaming exercise machines. Clients could use the gym whenever they wanted, Susan explained. The rest of the floor consisted of a long, narrow corridor. On each side were five wooden doors; beside each door, a long brown robe hung on a hook. "These are eating stations," Susan said. "Most clients have their meals here for the first week or so, until they get eating stations set up at home or buy portable models. They bring their own food, we set their timers, we buzz them after ten minutes, and they're done. You want to give it a try at lunch time? Good—I'll show you how later. Right now, let's go see Eliza."

Eliza Perkins sat behind an immense desk in a sunny, plant-filled office on the third floor. As she rose to greet me, I was struck by the resemblance between mother and daughter. Like Susan, Eliza had a heart-shaped face, large blue-gray eyes, a slightly long but elegantly molded nose, a firm chin with a prominent dimple. She shook my hand, smiled, and asked me what I thought of the Eat-to-Live system.

"I'm intrigued," I said, "but puzzled. As I understand it, you allow just ten minutes per meal. Most diets encourage people to eat slowly, to give the body time to realize it's not hungry anymore. If we rush through meals, aren't we likelier to overeat?"

"Oh, but we don't overeat because we're hungry," Eliza said eagerly. "We overeat because we relish the company of the people we're with, or because we get absorbed in the book we're reading or the television show we're watching. Our system removes all such factors as irrelevant to the need to supply the body with fuel. Once we control the eating environment, controlling eating itself becomes virtually effortless."

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"But one can't exercise such control at a lunch meeting," I said, "or a party—"

"We can conduct business or socialize without eating," Eliza said. "We allow only ice water at such gatherings. It's more efficient, less expensive, and much healthier."

"I suppose," I said. "Still, separating eating and socializing—it seems unnatural."

"Not at all," she insisted. "We don't turn other bodily functions into social occasions, do we? Imagine how absurd that would be. Just picture, for example—"

"That's all right," I cut in, not sure I wanted to picture what it would be like to turn other bodily functions into social occasions. "I understand the concept."

"Good," she said. "Did Mother ask you about working late tomorrow? The person who usually handles dinner shift can't make it—could you stay until eight?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I have a holiday celebration at my temple tomorrow night."

"A Jewish holiday in March?" Susan said. "I thought you had those in the fall."

"Oh, we have holidays all through the year. This one's called Purim. It celebrates the events described in the Book of Esther, in the Bible."

"I remember that story," Eliza said. "The king of Persia holds a beauty pageant and chooses a Jewish girl named Esther as his queen. Then his evil counselor plots to kill all the Jews, and Esther risks her life by stepping forward to save her people."

"That's a good story," Susan said, smiling. "I like stories about gutsy women."

"Well, you should," Eliza said warmly. "You're the gutsiest woman I know."

Instantly, Susan's pleasant expression was transformed by a ready anger. "What the hell's that supposed to mean? You being sarcastic? You making fun of me?"

"No—not at all," Eliza said, shrinking back. "It was a compliment—a sincere compliment." She looked down at her hands. "I hope you enjoy working here, Leah."

Already, Susan was simmering down; she patted Eliza's shoulder as we left. Even so, it felt good to get back downstairs. With Susan's guidance, I got through the breakfast rush and settled down to a quiet morning. Can't write more now—a counselor is covering the desk, but I can't impose on her any longer. I'll take more notes after lunch.

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1:15—I've now had my first meal in an Eating Station—quite an experience. But I should describe things in order.

The morning continued to go smoothly. I even found time to read a pamphlet describing Eliza Perkins's life. It told of years of poverty, of mother and daughter moving from city to city in search of marginally better jobs and marginally cheaper apartments. It told of a girl growing up fat and angry, doing poorly at school, dropping out, taking minimum-wage jobs, getting arrested for shoplifting, fattening herself still more on fast food and misery. Then, five years ago, the disaster that turned into salvation—a job on a freighter that left her stranded in Asia, forcing her to work as a bearer on an expedition to Tibet. Exploited and wretched, she wandered off one day and came across a monastery in an obscure valley. The monks took her in out of pity and helped her find inner peace and outer thinness. When she left, they agreed to let her tell their diet secrets to the West, on condition that she never disclose the location of their sanctuary. Determined to share what she had learned with all humankind, she made her way back to the United States, applied to the Ashton Travis Foundation for funds, and opened the first Eat-to-Live Center, which grew into a nationwide business offering exciting franchise opportunities.

Later that morning, I met the man who helped make Eliza Perkins's dream come true—about the same age as Eliza, just as attractive, even richer and more successful.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Ashton Travis. You're temping for Elaine?"

"That's right," I said. "I'm Leah Abrams. Are you a client, Mr. Travis?"

"It's Ashton," he said. "And no way am I a client—no way am I letting you shut me up in one of those little boxes. No, I'm just a hanger-on—right, Susan?"

"Not hardly." Susan walked over to hug him. "Ashton helped Eliza buy this building, and he's president of our board. He's our biggest supporter—and our cutest."

"I just wish that daughter of yours felt that way," he said mock-mournfully. "Can't you talk some sense into her, Susan? Can't you tell her how cute I am?"

"Oh, she knows you're cute," Susan said, smiling. "You gonna work out?"

"As usual," he said. "And I'll stop by Eliza's office later, try to tempt her to drink some water with me." He winked at me. "You have no idea how hard it is to romance a woman if you're not allowed to take her out to dinner or buy her chocolates."

He bounded up the stairs to the second floor, and Susan looked after him affectionately. "That's one sweet boy," she said. "And so

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crazy about Eliza! He's asked her to marry him a dozen times but she keeps saying no."

Lunch rush was busy but pleasant; the only rough spot came when an outside phoneline flashed. I pushed the button. "Eat-to-Live Center," I said.

"It's Bessie, honey," a woman's voice said. "Lemme talk to Eliza."

Did Eliza Perkins take calls from just anyone? I doubted it. "I'll tell her you wish to speak to her," I said. "What is your last name, please, and the purpose of your call?"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" the woman demanded, her voice suddenly harsh with rage. "You giving me a hard time? You trying to start something?"

"I'm sorry," I said stiffly. "I merely wish to be able to inform Ms. Perkins—"

"Oh, that's right," the woman said. "Elaine's off this week. What are you, a temp? Well, this is Bessie, and my calls go straight through. Ask Susan—she'll tell you."

Luckily, Susan was standing right next to me. "Excuse me, Susan," I said. "A woman wants to talk to Eliza. Her name is Bessie, and—"

"Put her through," Susan said quickly. "Bessie's a real good friend. Any time she wants to talk to Eliza, or to me, you connect her right away."

I put the call through promptly. The next notable incident happened about an hour later, when a bearded man of sixty or so walked in and said he wanted to sign up for the diet. Remembering James's instructions, I called up the intake form on the computer; the man settled rather stiffly into a chair near the desk and said his name was Paul Schmidt.

"And what is your address, Mr. Schmidt?" I asked.

He scratched his head, which was almost completely bald. "Don't exactly have one. I just moved here—haven't found an apartment yet. Put down the Lofton Motel."

"Fine," I said. "And your employer?"

He scratched his head again. "Don't exactly have one of those yet, either."

"Perhaps I should list your previous employer, then," I suggested.

"Okay by me," he said. "It's Find My Folks, Peoria, Illinois. Ever heard of us?"

"No, I haven't," I admitted. "Did you do genealogical research?"

"Sort of. Mostly, I helped adopted people track down their birth parents."

"Really?" I said, forgetting the form for a moment. "That must be fascinating."

"You bet," he said, "especially since I'm adopted myself. See,

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when I was a kid, I started having symptoms, so my folks tracked down my birth folks to see if they could tell us what was going on. Turned out I had this genetic-type deal, and the doctor couldn't be sure how to treat it till he knew about my background. Of course, not all people have medical reasons for tracking down their birth folks. For some people, it's emotional." He leaned across the desk. "You ever know any people who wanted to find their birth folks?"

"No, I don't think so," I said, "but I can understand how they feel. Now, Mr. Schmidt, could you describe your diet goals—your reasons for starting the program?"

He shrugged. "I wanna lose some weight, look better. What else?"

Well, yes, that was the obvious answer—except he didn't seem overweight to me. If he really wanted to look better, I thought, he should shave off his beard, which was neatly trimmed at the bottom but crept up along his cheeks in uneven, unkempt patches. But it wasn't my job to turn prospective customers away from my employer. "I see. And how many pounds would you like to lose, Mr. Schmidt?"

"Let's say ten." He lowered his voice confidentially. "The lady who started the diet, Eliza Perkins—she lost a ton, didn't she? What do you think of her? Honestly?"

"I think she's very friendly," I said. "But I've met her just once. I'm a temporary secretary, Mr. Schmidt. Today's my first day here, so I—"

"Oh, yeah?" Immediately, he seemed to lose interest in me. He looked around the lobby restlessly. "Look, maybe I should talk to Eliza Perkins herself."

"Oh, I doubt her schedule would allow that. One of our counselors—"

"Yeah, but I've got special concerns," he argued. "I've got real bad arthritis. I've gotta ask Eliza Perkins if this diet will affect that. Look." He held up his right arm and bent it at the elbow slowly. "See how stiff that is? It hurts like hell every time I do that."

"I'm sorry," I said, reaching for my purse. "If you'd like some aspirin—"

"Aspirin? No. Never touch the stuff. Hardly ever touch any drugs. I had more than my share of that junk when I was younger, and believe me, most of the time the side effects are worse than the disease." He grinned at me. "You ever see those commercials for the drug that's supposed to help folks who are shy about meeting new people?"

"For people with social anxiety disorder? Yes, I've seen those commercials."

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"And did you ever pay attention to the fast print at the end, about the possible side effects? You take this drug, you might end up with excessive sweating, bad breath, flatulence, sexual dysfunction." He grinned more broadly. "So now you're not shy about meeting people—but once you meet them, nobody wants anything to do with you."

If he was trying to charm me, he was succeeding. "Good point," I said, "but—"

Before I could finish the sentence, Eliza herself walked into the lobby, arm-in-arm with Ashton Travis. "Hello again, Leah," she said, walking over. "How are—oh."

Arthritis or no arthritis, Paul Schmidt bounded out of his chair. "How's it going?" he asked. "I recognize you from those 'after' photos. I'm signing up for your diet, but this lady thinks you're too busy to talk to me. What do you think?"

She seemed taken aback, then collected herself. "I'm always delighted to meet a new client. I'll be just a moment, Ashton. This way, please. We'll talk in my office."

Ashton looked after them. "Jilted again," he said, his tone falsely light, "and this time for an old guy who looks like his beard was pasted on in splotches."

"Oh, she's just devoted to her business," Susan said, rushing over. "Look, you have a seat. I'll get Leah started on lunch and be right back to talk to you. Ready, Leah?"

A little apprehensive, I followed her up to the long, narrow corridor where the eating stations were. She opened the first door on the right, and I found myself looking into a windowless cubicle, about six by nine feet. The only furniture was a rough wooden shelf fastened to the wall three feet from the floor, a large frameless mirror directly above the shelf, and a sort of wooden box bolted to the floor a foot from it. Next to the shelf was a metal panel with a switch—the intercom, I guessed. That was all.

"If you like," Susan said, "you can wear the robe on the hook outside the door. It's like the ones the monks wore at that monastery, and some clients wear them to get focused spiritually and all that. Wanna try it? No? Then sit on the stool and put your lunch on the table—on that shelf, I mean—and I'll run back downstairs. When you're ready to start eating, let me know over the intercom, and I'll set the timer for ten minutes. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, but felt strangely cut off from the world when she closed the door. Slowly, I opened my lunch bag and set things out on the shelf; I spotted a brownie—Sam's work, undoubtedly—and scrunched the bag up, embarrassed. Sitting down, I switched on the intercom and told Susan I was ready. The stool was too far

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from the shelf—I had to hunch forward to eat—and it was impossible to keep from looking in the mirror. Watching myself stuff lettuce in my mouth was unpleasant enough; when I got to the apple, and saw myself open my mouth grotesquely wide to take a bite, I gave up. I was ready to go before Susan sounded the buzzer to signal the end of my ten minutes.

"Well?" Susan asked when I got back downstairs. "What did you think?"

"I hated it," I said. "I felt self-conscious and uncomfortable."

"But did you feel like overeating? Can you imagine sitting there and watching yourself eat a double cheeseburger, or mashed potatoes dripping in gravy, or—"

"Please," I said, cringing at the image. "What about between meals?"

"You get two snacks a day," Susan said, plucking a brochure from a rack, "as long as you have them in an eating station and set the timer for two minutes. Here—this lists all the rules. Look them over, and if you want to start the diet, sign the vow."

At least eating didn't take up much of my lunch hour: I had plenty of time left to take notes. And I'm not tempted by the brownie; the thought of sitting in that eating station kills the urge to snack. It's an intriguing diet—I'll talk it over with Sam.

She arrived home just as he was taking the last tray from the oven.

"The hamantaschen turned out great, Mom," Sarah said, running over to hug her.

Both girls seized her hands and pulled her over to see the platters of triangular cookies, their centers filled with poppy-seed-and-honey mixture or with strawberry or apricot jam. "Lovely!" Leah said. "And so shiny! Did you brush the tops with egg yolk?"

Rachel nodded. "Try an apricot one, Mom. I did those."

"Not right now, sweetie," Leah said. "Good heavens! How many did you make?"

"About six dozen," Sam said, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Have a good day? Ready to start on the baskets? Sarah, if you get the candy, I'll grab the fruit, and—"

"Wait," Leah said. Never give or receive food as a gift—that was Rule Seven on the Eat-to-Live pledge she'd stopped just short of signing. "Maybe we shouldn't tempt people with all these candies and cookies. Especially the people in the retirement home—the sugar can't be good for them. Maybe some fruit—a little fruit—but—"

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"Uh-oh," Sam said, looking at her closely. "This has something to do with that place where you worked today, doesn't it? What—is there a rule against cookies? Honey, people expect hamantaschen in Purim baskets. It's in the Bible, even."

"No, it isn't," Leah said, pouncing on the technicality. "The Bible doesn't mention hamantaschen; it just says we should exchange gifts on Purim. We could put something else in the baskets." She pulled open the odds-and-ends drawer. "Here—we've got all these shiny new pencils. And batteries, and an unopened box of Band-Aids—"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Leah, we are not giving people Purim baskets full of pencils and batteries and Band-Aids. The old folks will rebel, and people at temple will think we're nuts. That's right—Rachel, where did we put the nuts for the baskets?"

She gave up, defeated by thousands of years of tradition and two eager little girls. Feeling vaguely guilty, she joined in as they wrapped the cookies in brightly colored cellophane and filled the baskets. Dinner proved problematic. She wanted to try the Eat-to-Live system, but Sam had made his homemade spaghetti sauce, and there was no turning that down. So she carried a tray to the bedroom and sat in front of the vanity-table mirror. Watching herself eat spaghetti was a disgusting process, and listening to the talk and laughter drifting up from the kitchen made her ache with loneliness. But she'd eaten only a fraction of the spaghetti by the time the buzzer went off, she was sure she'd never again want to swallow a noodle of any sort, and she felt proud when she joined Sam and the girls at the table, sipping slow, virtuous sips of ice water as she watched them eat.

"I need some help after dinner, Mom," Rachel said. "I want to go over my lines."

"You've only got two lines," Sarah pointed out. " 'What troubles you, O Queen? Is there a secret you can tell us?' How many times do you have to go over them?"

"Well, I wanted more lines," Rachel said. "I never wanted to be just a servant girl again. Why'd they have to pick Hilary Dunn for Esther? She can't act."

"Middle school kids always get the big parts," Sarah said wisely. "But you know what I don't get? Why didn't Esther tell the king she was Jewish when she married him?"

"She was probably afraid," Sam said, passing the meatballs around again. "The Jews were treated well in Persia, but they were a minority, and they did have enemies."

"Like Haman," Rachel said, and they all booed loudly, following

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the custom of drowning out any mention of the wicked counselor who plotted to kill the Jews of Persia.

"Yes, Esther probably feared that the king wouldn't love her anymore if he knew who she really was," Leah said when the noise died down. "And speaking of the king, Sam—how did the meeting with Freddy Beckett go? What does he want?"

Sam sighed, comforting himself with an extra ladle of sauce. "What else? An Elvis lawn ornament. But he can't decide whether he wants the young Elvis or the old Elvis, so I'm doing two sketches for him. He'll come by to see them on Wednesday."

She patted his arm. "Oh, well," she said. "It's better than more flamingos."

TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 1:45 P.M.

It's happened again. I can hardly believe it. If I were superstitious, I'd wonder if I'm some kind of jinx. Maybe writing about it will help.

I arrived at the center at 7:50 and found James Whitman pacing in the lobby. He'd been about to call my house, he said—he was afraid I wouldn't show up by the time the doors opened at 8:00. I got through breakfast rush easily. A few people came in for morning workouts, including Ashton Travis, who headed up to the gym around 10:30.

Ten minutes later, Paul Schmidt came in, shaggy but perky. "Here I am," he said. "I overslept a little, but I'm all ready for my first breakfast in an eating station."

"Wonderful." I noticed the thick manila envelope tucked under his arm and pointed. "I hope you haven't got that envelope stuffed with food," I joked.

"Food? No." He leaned his head back and laughed. "Don't you worry, honey. I got nothing but gold in this envelope—nothing but solid gold." He glanced at his watch. "Well, I'll head up to the second floor. Eating Station 1? Great."

At precisely 10:45—I know that, because I entered it in my log—his intercom button lit. "Start me going, sweetie," he said. "I'm hungry as a hog."

I set his timer. A few minutes later, Susan came over, lunch bag in hand, and said she was taking an extra early lunch. She walked upstairs briskly, we went through the intercom-and-timer routine at 10:49, and I got back to alphabetizing a stack of forms.

10:55—Paul Schmidt's timer went off. I buzzed his cubicle and waited for him to respond. Nothing. "Time's up, Mr. Schmidt," I said, and reset his timer for two minutes.

10:57—Paul Schmidt's timer went off again. I buzzed his cubi-

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cle again, got no response again, gave him a cheery reminder again, reset his timer again.

10:59—Paul Schmidt's timer went off for a third time, Susan's for the first time; at the same moment, an outside telephone line rang. I switched off the timers with my right hand, reached over for the telephone button with my left hand.

"—just plain stupid," a woman's voice was saying. "I don't want to—"

Oops—I'd pushed a button for a call in progress, rather than the button flashing with a new call. Embarrassed, I released the button, took care of the incoming call quickly, and switched on the intercoms for Susan and for Paul Schmidt. "Time's up," I said. Susan replied that she was just leaving her cubicle; Paul Schmidt said nothing.

11:01—Susan came back to the reception desk just as Paul Schmidt's timer went off for the fourth time. "He's six minutes over," I said. "What should I do?"

Susan shrugged. "Oh, six minutes is no big deal, not for a first timer. Set his timer for another two minutes—he'll probably come down on his own before it goes off."

But he didn't. His timer went off again at 11:03. "Time's up," I said. "Mr. Schmidt?" I turned to Susan. "That's the fourth time he hasn't responded. You don't think he could have had a heart attack or anything, do you? Should I check on him?"

"He's probably just pigging out," she said, frowning at a chip in her fingernail polish. "But if it'll make you feel better, sure—go check."

Even the walk up the stairs felt ominous. Tentatively, I knocked on the door of Eating Station 1. "Mr. Schmidt?" I said. "Are you all right? May I come in?"

No response. Oh, God, I thought, and turned the knob, and opened the door.

He lay on the floor, legs curled up under him, right arm flung out to the side. And there was blood—blood everywhere, more blood than I would have ever imagined a body could hold. I don't think I screamed; I don't think I could find the breath.

A second of helpless horror, and then I made myself move forward, found the intercom, switched it on. "Susan!" I cried. "Call 911! Get an ambulance! Something horrible has happened to Mr. Schmidt! I think—oh, God!—I think he's dead!"

Without waiting for her to respond, I ran into the gym, startling the people toiling at exercise machines. "Please!" I cried. "A man's hurt, horribly hurt. Can anyone help?"

They all ran down the corridor after me. Ashton Travis and

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someone else pulled Paul Schmidt out of the cubicle and made frantic, useless attempts to revive him. But he was dead. No one could lose that much blood and not be dead.

Susan rushed up from the first floor; James and Eliza rushed down from the third floor; people knelt by the body and felt for a pulse. The paramedics arrived and made more frantic, useless attempts. Eliza was in hysterics; her mother stroked her hair and whispered soothing things, then left her sobbing for a moment and came over to me.

"I gotta stay with Eliza," she said. "You have to take charge downstairs—people will be coming for lunch. Lock the door, put up a sign saying we're closed for the day, and wait to let the police in. Can you do that, honey? James—give her a hand."

James made the sign—"Closed until 2:00"—and posted it on the front door. I was sitting behind the reception desk when Detective Brock arrived; he did his usual double take when he saw me, nodded curtly, and headed upstairs. About fifteen minutes later, the paramedics came downstairs, carrying a sheet-shrouded stretcher. Another fifteen minutes, and Detective Brock came downstairs, too, his face sober and sympathetic.

"I'm sorry this happened again, Mrs. Abrams," he said. "I know it's always rough on you. But at least this time it wasn't murder. I mean, suicide's upsetting, too, but—"

My eyes widened. "Suicide? Oh no, Detective. He can't have committed suicide. He was in such a cheerful mood when he came in this morning."

"You can't tell with suicides," he said. "They're disturbed—they wouldn't kill themselves if they weren't. Some do act cheerful; it's a kind of bravado."

"This wasn't bravado," I said. "He seemed full of good spirits. He said yesterday that he was looking for a new job, and this morning he had a manila envelope under his arm; when I made a joke about it, he said it was full of 'gold—solid gold.' So I figured he had his résumé in the envelope, and he had an interview lined up, and—"

Brock shook his head. "I looked in that envelope. He had four or five magazines in there—*Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, like that. No résumé. And no gold."

"But isn't it odd for a man about to commit suicide to carry magazines around? He can't have been planning to read them."

"Maybe he hadn't made up his mind. That would fit with what Susan Perkins saw. When she went up to eat lunch, he was standing right outside his cubicle wearing one of those monk's robes. Maybe he sat in the cubicle for a few minutes, then stepped out—that's when she saw him. Maybe he was thinking about not kill-

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ing himself after all. But then he must've decided to go through with it, stepped back in, and slit his wrists."

"He wasn't wearing a monk's robe when I found him," I pointed out. "Is Susan sure Paul Schmidt is the person she saw? Did she see his face?"

"No—his back was to her; she just glanced at him before going into her cubicle. But he was the only other person up there at the time. Who else could it have been?"

"The murderer," I said, "disguising himself in a monk's robe so he couldn't be identified if someone happened to catch a glimpse of him."

"In theory, yeah. But slitting a guy's wrists isn't a real smart way of killing him. It'd be hard to sneak up on him and do it; the angle's wrong. You could knock him out first—but even so, you'd be taking a chance that someone would find him before he died. People can take a long time to bleed to death. And you might get his blood all over you."

"Another good reason for wearing a monk's robe," I said.

"Well, yeah," Brock admitted. "You could put it on over your own clothes, then stash it somewhere. But we know Schmidt committed suicide. He left a note."

"He did?" I said, wavering for the first time. "May I ask what it said?"

"Oh, what the hell." He rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out a plastic packet. "After all these cases, I almost feel like you're on the force. You can read it."

He held out the packet, and I read through the plastic: " 'This finishes it. I won't take any more. Paul Schmidt.' " I shook my head. "That's ambiguous," I said.

"Not in the context of a bloody room with a dead guy in it. But we'll make sure this is really his handwriting. You got a sample we can use? He fill out any forms here?"

"No, he just signed a form I filled out on the computer." I found the form.

Detective Brock looked it over. "The signature's a start," he said. "And it says here he was staying at the Lofton Motel. We'll check his room, look for other writing samples. We'll also look for his address in Peoria, see if he's got family we should notify. Did he say anything about his family when you were chatting yesterday?"

"Just that he was adopted," I said, calling the conversation to mind. "He said his adoptive parents had to locate his birth parents because he had a genetic condition." More details came back—the way he looked, the stiff way he settled into his chair. "Detective,"

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I said, "this probably sounds ridiculous, but in a book I read last year—"

"A medical book?" Brock asked.

"No, a mystery," I said, blushing, "by Dorothy Sayers. The victim was like Mr. Schmidt. He had stiff joints. He had a beard, because he was afraid of cutting himself while shaving. And when someone cut his throat, he bled to death very profusely. It turned out he had a genetic condition—hemophilia. Might Mr. Schmidt have had it, too?"

He looked skeptical. "Well, one of the medics did say he was surprised there wasn't more clotting. But isn't hemophilia controlled by drugs these days?"

"I doubt it's completely controlled. And Mr. Schmidt didn't trust drugs. He said he took too many when he was young. If the killer knew he'd bleed to death quickly—"

"Big 'if,' " Brock cut in. "He'd have to know that Schmidt had hemophilia, and that he didn't trust drugs—not things you'd tell just anybody."

"He practically told me," I countered, "in a ten-minute conversation. And if he did have hemophilia, would he slit his wrists? Hemophiliacs must live in fear of bleeding to death. Would someone who's afraid of heights commit suicide by jumping off a bridge?"

He thought it over, then shrugged. "There's no telling what suicides would do. But you've given me something to think about. Now, we need to take your fingerprints—we are being careful, and we'll check all the prints in that cubicle, make sure there aren't any that don't belong there." He paused. "You realize that if Schmidt was murdered, someone who was in this building this morning must have done it. Can you think of any reason why anyone at the Eat-to-Live Center might want Schmidt dead?"

"No," I admitted. "None whatsoever."

"I didn't think so. The guy apparently came to town just a day or so ago—not many people make enemies that fast."

A few more minutes of talk, fingerprints taken at an impromptu station set up at the reception desk, official thanks for our cooperation, and the police were gone. Most of the clients left immediately; Ashton stayed, his arm now seeming cemented to Eliza's shoulders. The staff had congregated in the lobby, wondering what would happen next. Eliza still looked too shaken to address the troops, so her mother took over.

"Well, this has been awful," she said, "just awful. I'm sure we all feel real sorry for poor Mr. Schmidt. Now, we can all go home and rest up, and tomorrow—"

"They can't go home," James Whitman cut in. "We can't turn cli-

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ents away twice in one day; we might lose them. We're reopening at 2:00. That's what I put on the sign."

Susan stared at him, amazed. "Who the hell told you to write that? I said 'closed for the day.' Damn it, we can't reopen in twenty minutes—we can't even get the place cleaned up that fast. And everybody's too shook up to work. Eliza, what do you think?"

Eliza looked up, her eyes red. "I—that is, it doesn't seem respectful. Ashton?"

"Change the sign to read 2:30," he said, his voice firm—you could tell he was used to taking command. "That gives us time to make a decision. Eliza, Susan, James, and I will meet in the conference room. The rest of you can take a lunch break."

We didn't take our lunches to the eating stations, though—after what happened, no one wanted to go up to that long, narrow corridor. Some counselors went to their offices; a few lingered in the lobby. I've stayed at the desk, too sick at heart to eat, taking these notes. I wonder what the decision will be. I hope they tell us to go home. I hope—

2:55—They told us to go home. But I'm sitting in my car, a few blocks from the Center, taking these notes. I have to get the details down before I forget them.

At 2:10, an outside phone line rang, and I pushed the flashing button. "It's Bessie," a woman's voice said. "Lemme talk to Susan."

"I'm sorry, Bessie," I said. "I know that normally your calls go straight through. But Susan's in a special meeting now—an executive session—and I really don't—"

"Hell, you starting something with me again?" Her voice had been harsh before; now, it was furious. "I don't care what she's doing or who she's with. You damn well better put her on the line this minute, or I'll damn well make you sorry you didn't."

Thoroughly bullied, I switched on the intercom to the conference room. "I'm sorry," I said. "Bessie wants to speak to Susan. I said you were in a meeting, but—"

"It's fine," Susan's voice answered. "I'll take the call in Eliza's office."

I switched the call. Moments later, Susan rushed into the lobby and headed for the door. "Back in ten minutes," she called and was gone.

Not sure why I needed to know more, but convinced it was vital, I walked over to a counselor. "Could you watch the phones?" I asked. "I feel queasy—I need some air."

"No wonder," she said, standing up readily. "I'd feel queasy, too, if I'd been the one to find him. Take a walk, Leah—it'll do you good."

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Stepping outside, I saw Susan walking rapidly down the street; I hung back a block and followed. In a few minutes, she reached the corner of Cypress and Lynx, where a heavyset woman waited for her, wearing jeans and a hooded jacket, taking up two-thirds of the bench at the bus stop. Feeling conspicuous, I stepped into the doorway of a restaurant and pretended to study the menu in the window, stealing glances at the two women from time to time. They talked intensely; Susan took the other woman's hands in hers; the other woman nodded; they stood up and walked down Cypress. Before long, they paused in front of the entrance to a small, cheerful-looking white brick building. "Bessie's Bakery," the lettering on the window said. Afraid to push my luck further, I hurried back to the Eat-to-Live Center. By the time Susan returned, I was seated at the reception desk, alphabetizing forms. She went upstairs, and a few minutes later Ashton came down to tell us that the center was closing for the day, that we could all go home.

I didn't go straight home, though. Instead, I drove to Bessie's Bakery.

A bell tinkled lightly as I opened the door and walked into a large, immaculate room lined with glass cases and fragrant with the warm, sweet smells of yeast and sugar and cinnamon. A short, pleasantly pudgy man stood behind the counter.

"I'd like a loaf of bread, please," I said. "That raisin-nut bread looks perfect."

He smiled as he wrapped it up. "And you have to sample Bessie's butterscotch oatmeal cookies. Once you try one, you'll want a dozen more."

So much for the Eat-to-Live System, I thought, and bit into one. "Delicious," I said honestly—it rivaled Sam's hamantaschen. "You're right—I would like a dozen." It was no time to be bringing still more cookies into our house, but I was priming a witness. "Is there a real Bessie, or is she just a symbol, like Betty Crocker?"

"Oh, no," he said. "There's a real Bessie, all right—my wife, Bessie Mulligan."

"She's a wonderful cook," I said. "I'd love to meet her. Is she in today?"

"She's in back, but she's sort of shy—not big on meeting the public. That's my department. She just bakes all day long—nothing makes her happier." He grinned. "So I mix with the customers, she mixes up the batter, and we both make plenty of dough."

I laughed politely, promised to tell all my friends about the cookies, and drove around the corner to jot down these notes. I'm still puzzled by many things that happened at the Eat-to-Live Center, and I don't know who murdered Paul Schmidt. But I'm

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more sure than ever that he was murdered, and I'm beginning to think I might know why.

It seemed wrong to get ready for the Purim carnival after such a day, with the image of Paul Schmidt still fresh in her mind. But that was part of the point of Purim—to celebrate even in the face of adversity, to affirm life even when death seemed to prevail. Besides, it would be impossible to tell the girls that they would have to miss the carnival, that Mommy was in no mood to witness Rachel's triumph in the role of Servant Girl 4.

She was helping with last-minute costume crises when she heard the doorbell ring, heard Sam open the door, heard a now-familiar voice ask if she was at home. Here we go again, she thought, and put a final stitch in Sarah's cape, and hurried downstairs.

There was Detective Brock standing by the fireplace, looking awkward but determined, just as he had on those other nights. "I'm sorry to disturb you at home, Mrs. Abrams," he said. "Your husband said you've got a religious celebration tonight, and I sure don't want to make you late. But if I could have a few minutes—"

"Of course, Detective. Please, sit down. Can we get you some coffee?"

"No thanks," he said, still standing. "I won't stay long. But I wanted to tell you that you may have been right. The suicide theory's fading. Murder theory's looking up."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, "but not surprised. Is there new evidence?"

"A bunch," he said, and took out his pad. "After talking to you, I put a rush on the autopsy. Some odd things turned up. First, the cuts on both of Schmidt's wrists were left to right, both equally deep. We'd expect the cut on the right wrist to be right to left; we'd expect the second cut to be shallower than the first. Plus, there's a big bruise on the back of his head. Maybe he fell and hit his head on the shelf after he cut himself, but the angle isn't right—we can't figure out how he could hit his head in that spot. And the bruise is so deep, the doc thinks his head got hit before he died, maybe before his wrists were cut."

Leah thought it over. "Someone with hemophilia would bruise more quickly and deeply than most people, wouldn't he? Did Mr. Schmidt have hemophilia?"

"Yup," Brock said. "The doc confirmed that. Good guess, Mrs. Abrams. Another thing: Schmidt ate a big breakfast shortly before

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he died—eggs, bacon, potatoes, pancakes. Sort of a funny thing for a guy to do on his way to a diet center."

"But don't people about to commit suicide often behave irrationally?" Sam asked.

"Oh, yeah—I told your wife that just today. Even so, it's odd. And Schmidt told Mrs. Abrams that he'd moved here, that he was looking for a job and an apartment. Well, I called his boss at this Find My Folks place in Peoria, and it turns out Schmidt never quit his job there—he just asked for a week's vacation. And his landlord in Peoria says he never gave notice on his apartment, never moved any of his stuff out."

"So he wasn't relocating," Leah said slowly, "and he wasn't serious about dieting. He must have come to this city—and to the Eat-to-Live Center—for another reason."

"That's how I figure it, too," Brock said. "Any idea what that reason might be?"

"I've had one," she admitted. "But it's an ugly reason, and of course I don't have proof. If it's true, though, it would provide a motive for murder."

"Then I want to hear about it," Brock said, and sat down for the first time.

She sat down, too. "Mr. Schmidt helped adopted children find their birth parents. It occurred to me that some birth parents might not want to be found. And if they have money—well, it might create a tempting situation for blackmail."

"Makes sense," Brock said, nodding. "So, Schmidt tracks down the birth parent—but instead of handing the information over to the kid, he goes to the parent and demands money to stay silent. And you think the birth parent works at Eat-to-Live?"

"Perhaps." She looked at Sam and blushed. "I showed my husband the Eat-to-Live brochure, and when he read about Eliza Perkins going to Tibet five years ago and losing all that weight and swearing never to disclose the location of the monastery that taught her its diet secrets—well, he giggled. He said that it sounded ridiculous, that Eliza probably lost her weight in some prosaic way and made up the Eat-to-Live system as a gimmick. That hadn't occurred to me. I'm afraid I tend to be too naïve, too credulous."

"You're a trusting person," Sam said, taking her hand. "That's a wonderful quality. And I'm probably too skeptical most of the time."

"You're also right most of the time," she said. "I started thinking about it today. Maybe Eliza dropped out of sight five years ago for a different reason. Maybe she got pregnant out of wedlock, went

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somewhere to have her baby, and gave it up for adoption. If so, it might be embarrassing for her to have her child turn up at this point."

"That's true," Brock agreed. "Of course, these days it's no big scandal to have an illegitimate kid—would it really hurt her that much?"

"It might," Leah said, "if the press found out and started checking into things and showed that the whole Tibet story was a lie. And Eliza did agree to speak to Mr. Schmidt privately yesterday—that surprised me. Maybe it wasn't the first time she'd seen him. Maybe he'd approached her before—and when she turned him away, he pressured her by showing up at her place of business."

"Plausible," Brock said. "And then she killed him to shut him up?"

"Not necessarily. She may have agreed to pay him and then confided in someone else. And that person might have killed Mr. Schmidt to protect her—and the business."

"So, if you're right," Brock said, "who might she have confided in? Her mother, her boyfriend—they were both at the Center when Schmidt was killed. Anyone else?"

It felt terribly wrong to give Brock a name, to make someone a murder suspect. "There's the CFO, James Whitman. If Eliza needed a lot of money in a hurry, she might have asked him how to get it. But would he have a strong motive to protect her?"

"If her business is making him rich, you bet he would," Brock said cheerfully. "He goes on the list. There's a problem, though. If you're right about all this, her kid would only be about four years old. That's a little soon to search for a birth parent."

"Not if the child has an inherited medical condition," Leah said. "That's why Paul Schmidt's adoptive parents searched for his birth parents when he was a little boy."

"True," Brock said. "Well, that fits together pretty good. I'll tell you something else that might fit. We went to Schmidt's motel room to look for a handwriting sample to compare with the suicide note. Well, the handwriting matched up, all right—with this."

He handed them a photocopy of a note scrawled on a Lofton Motel pad. "Manila envelope, 9 x 12," it read. "Clasp."

"We also found a plastic bag from Staples in the room," he said, "containing a package with two other envelopes in it, plus a receipt saying the purchase was made at 8:37 last night. What do you think?"

"The same thing you're thinking, I imagine," she said. "Someone called him with instructions about the sort of envelope he was supposed to bring to the Eat-to-Live Center, and he rushed out to buy one. Presumably, he put the blackmail evidence in his envelope, and would get an identical envelope filled with money in exchange."

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"Yeah, except the killer stuffed the envelope with magazines instead," Brock said, "and slit Schmidt's wrists before he got to open it."

"But first," Leah said, "the killer got Mr. Schmidt to write a note promising not to ask for more blackmail money—'I've had enough. This finishes it.' Maybe the killer dictated the exact words, and Mr. Schmidt wrote them down, not suspecting a trick and eager to get his money. Perhaps the killer stood behind him while he wrote, then knocked him out and killed him. Would the autopsy results be consistent with that?"

"I'll check with the doc. And standing behind Schmidt would be smart—the killer wouldn't be as likely to get bloody. Here's something else. We didn't find a keycard for the Lofton on Schmidt's body. No big deal—people lose those things all the time. And sure enough, we found Schmidt's keycard in the motel parking lot, like it'd fallen out of his pocket. The funny part is the keycard didn't have any fingerprints on it, like it'd been wiped clean. And a cleaning lady at the motel said she saw someone come out of Schmidt's room around eleven thirty. It could've been someone checking the room after the murder, to make sure Schmidt hadn't left copies of the blackmail evidence for us to find."

"Could the cleaning woman identify the person she saw?" Leah asked.

"No, just said it was a heavyset woman—that sure doesn't match up with anyone at the diet center. And searching Schmidt's room would be risky—stupid, too, since any copies would probably be in Peoria, not his motel room." He stood up. "I'll call his boss again, see if Find My Folks had any cases that might match up with Eliza Perkins. You gonna work at Eat-to-Live tomorrow? Don't say anything to anybody. I want some real evidence before I confront those folks, and I wanna take them by surprise when I do."

She nodded, wondering if she should tell him about Bessie Mulligan. A heavyset woman at the Lofton Motel, a heavyset woman meeting Susan—the same woman? But it seemed unlikely, and it felt wrong to add yet another name to the list of suspects.

"Thanks for your help," Brock said, and started to head for the door, then turned back. "Oh, yeah—I meant to ask you about that book you were working on last time, the one about strategic intimacy enhancement. Is it coming out soon?"

"Probably not," Leah admitted. "A publisher asked to see the manuscript, but it's been several months since I've heard from him; I'm beginning to think he may not be terribly interested. I'm making good progress on my new book, though."

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"I gotta hear the title," Detective Brock said. "Your titles—well, they're special."

Leah shrugged modestly. "It's *A Hermeneutics of Workplace Communication: Impactful Disclosure through Nonarticulate Signifiers and Subcognitive Verbal Substitutions*. Essentially, I posit we can best gauge workers' competencies and attitudes through attention to gestures, facial expressions, and so on. People can speak insincerely, but their bodies give us valid information their words successfully obscure."

"You mean words can lie but bodies can't?" Brock said. "That's real interesting. Of course, judging from what I've seen, I'd say the best liars can fool us pretty damn good with their bodies, too; and sometimes their words let on more than they realize. But what do I know? I don't have a PhD or nothing; I should just shut up. Well, here's my card—my home number's on the back. Call any time if something occurs to you."

Such a nice man, Leah thought, and wondered again if she should tell him about Bessie Mulligan. I'll talk it over with Sam later, she decided, and put it out of her mind.

She sat with her family, listening to the reading of the Megillah, the ancient scroll telling of the girl who hid her identity when she became a queen, but found the courage to reveal the truth and unmask a villain when her people were threatened. After the reading, they went downstairs for the potluck supper. The ultimate violation of the Eat-to-Live creed, Leah thought ruefully, as friends loaded her plate with specialties they wanted her to sample; where could you find starker proof that social occasions pressure you into eating too much? But at the end of this harsh day, it was comforting to linger over the meal, to chat about recipes, to see people taking a second helping of her fruit salad. Finally, it was time for the play. Rachel's moment of glory came after Haman's wicked plot was discovered, after Queen Esther's cousin told her she had to risk her life to save her people. This was a scene not actually in the Megillah—the religious school teachers had exercised dramatic license to give more children speaking parts. Queen Esther returned to her chambers, distraught, and her servant girls crowded around her.

"What troubles you, O Queen?" Rachel said, her voice loud and strong. She lifted her hands in an inquisitive gesture. "Is there a secret you can tell us?"

"I dare not," the eighth-grader playing Queen Esther intoned in a melodramatic rumble. "I have not even dared to tell my hus-

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band—yet now I must. Alas! What if he no longer loves me once he knows the truth? He may reject me. He may—kill me!"

Leah smiled, knowing the happy ending was minutes away. She looked around her at all the audience members in costume—children, mostly, but some adults had also put on silly hats or masks. A sea of masks, Leah thought, and found her mind drawn to the Eat-to-Live Center. But that was silly. No two places could have less in common.

The play ended, parents applauded until their elbows ached, the actors took their bows. An exchange of Purim baskets, and it was time to go home. Somehow, she and Sam got the girls quieted down and into bed, then headed to the den and collapsed.

"I'm beat," Sam said. "It's a good thing I got the Elvis sketches for Freddy Beckett done this afternoon—I wouldn't have the strength to lift a pencil now."

"Oh, you finished them?" She picked up the folder on the coffee table. "Let me see—oh, Sam! They're wonderful."

Once again, she felt amazed by Sam's ability to capture character with a pencil. At first, the sketches seemed to have nothing but a guitar in common—the slender, energetic youth in jeans and an open-collared shirt, and the weary, bloated figure in a sequined cape and too-tight jumpsuit. But the essential personality was the same—the undimmed innocence in the eyes, the lingering sensuality of the lips, the trace of a swagger. Different as the sketches were, these were clearly two stages in the same life.

Two stages in the same life, she thought, and looked at the sketches more closely; then she closed her eyes, remembering. No. Something was wrong.

She opened her eyes and looked at her watch. Almost ten o'clock—but he'd said she could call any time. She went to the kitchen and dialed Detective Brock's number.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late, Detective," she began.

"That's okay," he said. "I don't have any news, though. That Find My Folks guy in Peoria looked through all Schmidt's files for the last four years. No cases of trying to track down the birth parents of a young kid with a genetic disorder."

"I'm calling about something else, actually," she said. "I was wondering if you could check some fingerprint evidence."

"Fingerprints?" he said. "No, there's nothing there. We already checked all the prints in that cubicle. Just Schmidt, Eat-to-Live employees and clients who tried to help him, paramedics, cops. No mystery prints from someone who shouldn't have been there."

"That's not what I meant," she said, and explained.

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15

Arrived at the Eat-to-Live Center at 7:45 and was amazed to see the parking lot teeming with cars and people. A man with a megaphone shouted something I couldn't make out; at least two dozen men and women clustered around him, carrying signs I couldn't yet read. A pale, slender man in his early fifties caught sight of me and waved. "It's Leah, isn't it?" he said, walking over to me. "Do you remember me?"

"Of course, Mr. Roderick," I said. "What are you doing here? What's going on?"

As answer, he showed me the sign he was carrying. "Eat-to-Die," it read. "We're informing the public," he said, "before this diet drives still more people to suicide."

"But the man who died yesterday hadn't even actually begun the diet." I said.

"Proving," he said, "that even the slightest exposure to this diet is deadly." Someone tugged on my arm. "Come inside, Leah," James Whitman said. "Don't talk to these terrorists. And you—get this mob off our property, or I'll call the police."

"Freedom of speech!" Mr. Roderick shot back. "The right to assembly! Diet of death! Diet of death! Diet of death!"

The crowd took up the chant; it bounced off the glass doors as James closed them behind us. "Disgusting," he said. "Intimidating employees—frightening customers—spreading slander. Well, what can we expect when the press is so irresponsible?"

He handed me a copy of the morning newspaper. "Diet of Death?" the front-page headline read. The article reported that Paul Schmidt had slashed his wrists while secluded in a cubicle; it didn't quite say the diet drove him to suicide, but it did quote a psychologist commenting on the effects of isolation on people suffering from depression.

"Completely misleading." James smoothed his sparse hair back over his head. "I lodged a complaint; the paper will print a clarification tomorrow. But this will cost us—at least in the short term, this will cost us. Did you know that man you were talking to?"

"Yes, I temped for him once," I said. "He's Edgar Roderick—he's a caterer."

"A caterer!" James exclaimed. "I should have known. I bet they're all caterers—and restaurateurs, and other riffraff. They've always hated us."

A roar went up outside, and we saw Eliza and Susan Perkins hurrying through the parking lot. Demonstrators were waving signs at Eliza, screaming insults, shaking fists. It was natural, I suppose, for

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them to be hostile—her diet was a threat to their business. Still, it was disheartening to see people in the hospitality industry being so rude.

"Those bastards!" Susan said once she and Eliza got inside. "Right in our own parking lot! Call the cops, James—clear them out."

"I'm not sure the police can do that, Mother," Eliza said, looking pale. "There are First Amendment issues involved. And in any case, the publicity generated by a confrontation with the police might do us more damage than the demonstration itself."

"Damn it!" Susan said. "There must be something we can do. I'll call Ashton—he's president of the board—he should be here. We'll have a meeting—9:00, okay?"

She and James hurried to their offices; Eliza sank into a chair, seeming too dispirited to go anywhere. I poured her a glass of ice water.

"Are you sure you're up to a meeting?" I asked. "Do you feel strong enough?"

She smiled faintly. "I'll be all right. And perhaps a meeting is a good idea. It will give everyone a chance to express his or her opinion, to share ideas."

"That's true," I said, and paused. "That brochure about your life said you dropped out of high school at seventeen. Did you ever go back for a GED?"

"I—no, I didn't," she said, clearly surprised by the question. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason—I was just curious. Well, I should get ready for the breakfast rush."

But there was no rush. A few dieters made it past the protestors; most stayed away. I sat idly at the desk, wondering if Detective Brock had made any progress; James called twice to ask if Ashton had arrived. Restless, I wandered over to the doors and looked out into the parking lot. A Party Planners van had pulled up; waiters were plying protestors with croissants and cappuccino and chilled kiwi. Ashton arrived at 8:45 and ran upstairs; moments later, Susan called the desk and asked me to bring a pitcher of ice water to the conference room. By the time I got there, they were all seated around the long oak table—Eliza, Susan, James, Ashton. Ashton gestured to an empty chair.

"Sit down, Leah," he said. "What do you know about this Roderick character?"

"Not much," I said. "Only that he runs a catering business called Party Planners."

"Is he someone with whom we could reason?" Eliza asked. "If we invited him—"

There was a brisk knock, and then Detective Brock opened the

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door without waiting for permission. "Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but this can't wait. We no longer consider Paul Schmidt's death a suicide. This is a murder investigation now. Schmidt was working on a blackmail scheme—that's why he was murdered. And someone searched his motel room after he was killed. Any of you know anything about that?"

"What are you implying?" Ashton asked, standing up. "Do you think one of us is involved in this somehow, that one of us searched his room?"

"No, you were all here when his room was searched," Brock said. "None of you could have left long enough to go to the Lofton, not without us noticing. You wanna meet the person who did search Schmidt's room? She's right here. Officer Martin?"

A uniformed policewoman stepped into the conference room, leading a woman in handcuffs. She looked steadily at the floor; even so, I got a good look at her. She weighed over 300 pounds, but the weight didn't obscure the heart-shaped face, the large blue-gray eyes, the slightly long but elegantly molded nose, the firm chin with a prominent dimple. Her shoulders were hunched forward defensively, her lips tightened into a near snarl.

"This is Bessie Mulligan," Brock said. "Any of you know this lady?"

"Of course not," Ashton said promptly. "Does she claim to know us?"

"She doesn't claim anything," Brock replied. "I haven't gotten a word out of her. But she's been identified as the woman seen leaving Schmidt's motel room at 11:30 yesterday. She was careful not to leave fingerprints in his room, by the way, but she left a nice, clear set on the door in the lobby—guess she didn't want to call attention to herself by wearing gloves out where folks could see her. I'll ask again—anyone know her?"

For a moment, there was silence. Then Eliza cleared her throat. "Detective, you have no right to interrogate us without an attorney present."

"Hell, I'm not interrogating anyone—just giving you a chance to come forward. But no one wants to, I guess. So I'll ask this straight out. Mrs. Perkins, if you don't know this lady, how come there's a picture of you on the bureau in her bedroom?"

Susan shrank back for a second; then her lips tightened, and she stared at him hard. "You stupid cop," she said. "You go to hell."

"Fine," Brock said. "We'll discuss it at the station. I haven't checked phone records yet, but I bet we'll find you called this lady's bakery yesterday morning. You told her to come get the keycard you'd taken from Schmidt's body, didn't you?"

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That must have been the call I interrupted, I realized, when I picked up the wrong line and heard a woman say that something was stupid, that she didn't want to do it.

"Either of you wanna tell me about that call?" Brock asked, looking briefly from Bessie to Susan. Their very silence was surly. "Okay," he said. "Then I'm holding you both for complicity in the murder of Paul Schmidt. Officer, get out another pair of cuffs."

"Wait," Eliza said. She looked at Ashton, then squared her shoulders. "You were right about one thing, Detective—Mr. Schmidt was a blackmailer. He tried to blackmail me. But neither Bessie nor my mother knew about it until after he was dead."

"Eliza, stop," Susan cut in. "You don't have to say nothing more, honey."

"I do have to," Eliza said. "I had a reason to want him dead; you and Bessie didn't. Leave my mother alone, Detective." She took a deep breath. "And my sister."

"Your sister?" Ashton took a step back. "Eliza, you never said you had a sister."

"You bet she does," Brock said cheerfully. "Didn't I tell you Bessie's full name? Elizabeth Perkins Mulligan. Bessie's a nickname for Elizabeth; so is Eliza. So is Lizzie—that's what Bessie was called when she was younger, and that's the name on her arrest records for shoplifting. The fingerprints on those records match up perfect with the ones from the motel lobby, and the ones we took from Bessie this morning." He looked at Eliza pointedly. "They don't match up with the prints we took from you yesterday, though, Miss Perkins. I'm sure glad I got the idea to check that fingerprint evidence."

He winked at me. I could have killed him.

"You're talking nonsense," Ashton said. "I don't understand one word you said about fingerprints. Eliza, what is this? You and your sister are both named Elizabeth?"

She looked at the floor. "No. My name is Victoria Baxter. Bessie and I are twins. When we were born, my mother was a teenager, a widow. She knew she wouldn't be able to support us both. So she kept Bessie—Lizzie—and gave me up for adoption."

"I didn't want to do it, honey," Susan said, the tears starting in her eyes. "But two babies to feed, to take care of all by myself—I just didn't have the guts to try."

"You did the right thing, Mother," Eliza said, taking her hands. "It was the only thing you could possibly do. Why can't you believe that I understand that?"

Ashton sat down. "I still don't get it. What about Tibet?"

She turned to face him. "That was all a lie, Ashton. I grew up in

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Peoria with my adoptive parents. I was never overweight. When I was twenty-four, my adoptive parents died in a car accident, leaving me quite a bit of money. I decided to look for my birth parents and went to Find My Folks. Paul Schmidt helped me locate my mother—and Lizzie. Then, one day, Lizzie joked that she and I looked like before-and-after pictures. That gave us the idea. We left the country together, and when we came back I started Eat-to-Live and used part of my inheritance to get Lizzie—Bessie—started in a bakery. She's had to stay out of sight most of the time, but she met a wonderful man and married him, and—well, that's the story. I'm sorry I never told you; I was afraid you'd hate me if you knew the truth. That's why I couldn't marry you. I couldn't carry the lie that far."

Detective Brock cleared his throat. "This is all real interesting, folks," he said, "but there's still the little matter of Paul Schmidt's murder to clear up. Miss Perkins—Miss Baxter—you say Schmidt was trying to blackmail you."

"Yes," Eliza said. "He'd recognized me from the 'after' pictures in a commercial, and he showed up with my Find-My-Folks records. He said he'd go on national television and say the diet was a fraud. He wanted two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for his silence—one payment, in cash."

Brock nodded. "I figured it was something like that. Now, you say you didn't tell your mother and sister about this threat. Did you tell anyone?"

"Yes," she said, and stood up slowly. "I told one person. Him." She pointed at other the end of the table. "James Whitman."

James sat with his hands folded in front of him, his shoulders relaxed. He looked Detective Brock directly in the eyes. "That's true. She told me about it on Monday and asked if, as CFO, I could help her put the money together. I said I needed time; at her request, I called Mr. Schmidt at his motel that night and asked him to come to the center again on Friday. He agreed. I don't know why he came on Tuesday instead; I don't know anything about how or why he died. That's all I can tell you, Detective."

"That damn well isn't all, James!" Bessie cried out, breaking her silence at last. "Tell him how you called me yesterday, and said some guy slit his wrists at the center, and I had to go to his motel right away because this guy had evidence that could hurt us, and I had to find it before the cops did. Tell him how you made me meet you in the parking lot, and how you gave me the keycard you'd took from the guy's body."

"That's true too," James said, nodding. "When I heard a client had committed suicide and ran to help, I saw it was Paul Schmidt. I panicked. I figured the police would look through his belongings.

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So when no one was looking, I slipped my hand into his pocket, found his keycard, and called Bessie. I admit to trying to suppress blackmail evidence, but I had no idea Mr. Schmidt was murdered. I still don't think he was."

It sounded plausible, and he looked utterly calm. Maybe it really was suicide, I thought; but then I remembered. "Excuse me," I said, turning to Bessie. "You went to Mr. Schmidt's room to look for blackmail evidence. Did you find any?"

She shook her head. "I didn't find nothing."

"So Schmidt showed Miss Perkins blackmail evidence on Monday," Brock said, "and by Tuesday, it was gone. I'd say the murderer took it—and I'd say the murderer pretty much has to be in this room."

"Cross my mother and my sister and Ashton off that list," Eliza said, her voice surprisingly firm. "They didn't know Schmidt was a blackmailer; they had no reason to want him dead. James had an excellent reason. He's been blackmailing us for years, ever since he stumbled across the truth about the diet—he's kept most of the profits from the business for himself. He wouldn't want Schmidt cutting into those profits."

James shook his head. "I can understand why you want to protect the people you love—but we have only your word for it that you didn't tell them about Mr. Schmidt. And to accuse me of blackmail—that hurts. Detective, you're welcome to examine the books for the business. They won't show any trace of blackmail or profit skimming."

"Of course not," Eliza shot back. "You keep those books yourself—I'm sure you've hidden everything carefully. But you have been blackmailing us, and I think you must have killed Paul Schmidt. I've thought so ever since I saw his body."

"Well, somebody's lying," Brock said evenly. "Next step is figuring out who. I say we all go downtown, find out there. Officer, let's read these folks their rights."

"One moment," I said. Images were coming to me—James pacing in the parking lot at 7:20 on Monday, fretting by the phone at 7:50 the next morning, calling the desk at 8:30 and again at 8:40 to ask if Ashton had arrived for a 9:00 meeting. Obsessively punctual, I thought, and forced two events into sequence. "James said he called Bessie after the body was found, after he'd run downstairs to help and taken the keycard."

"That's how it happened," James said impatiently. "Detective, I don't—"

"That's not how it happened," I said. "Mr. Schmidt had gone to his eating station; I'd buzzed twice to say time was up. Then, when

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his timer went off again, I picked up a phoneline by mistake and heard Bessie say she didn't want to do something."

"She must've been talking to Mr. Whitman about the keycard," Brock said. "They've both already admitted to the call, Mrs. Abrams."

"But don't you see?" I said. "I didn't go up to check on Mr. Schmidt until five minutes later." I turned to face James. "You're so compulsive about wanting things done on time; you get nervous if they're not done ahead of time. It must have driven you crazy to sit in your office, waiting for the alarm to spread so you could move on to the next step in your plan. Finally, you couldn't stand it any longer. You called Bessie before anybody knew Mr. Schmidt was dead—except the murderer."

He looked at me coldly. "You're confused. You have the times mixed up."

"Knowing Mrs. Abrams," Brock said cheerfully, "I bet she doesn't. Anyhow, the phone records will settle it. I'll get those checked right now—nobody leaves until we find out." He turned to the policewoman. "Officer, it might take the phone company a while to get an answer to us—why don't you send out for coffee and doughnuts for everyone?"

It was a flagrant violation of the Eat-to-Live creed; everyone should have objected vigorously. For some reason, though, nobody said a word.

She wasn't surprised when Detective Brock showed up at their door again that evening; she was dismayed, though, when she saw the large, napkin-covered basket in his arms. "My wife's special blueberry muffins," he announced. "I wanted to drop off a couple dozen, to thank you for—oh. Sorry. I didn't think you'd still be eating dinner."

"We're loitering," Leah admitted. "The girls wanted to know what happened at the Eat-to-Live Center—it took a while to explain. Would you like some hamantaschen?"

The girls agreed to take charge of the dishes in exchange for blueberry muffins at bedtime, allowing the adults to take their cookies and coffee into the living room. "I wish I'd been around when you were explaining things to your daughters," Brock said. "Maybe then I'd understand it. The main thing I don't get is, how did you figure out Eliza Perkins and Bessie Mulligan are twins? You'd never even seen Bessie's face, right?"

"No," she said, "but I'd seen the before-and-after photos, and last night I realized they didn't match—and not just in the obvious ways. Sam made me see that."

"Me?" Sam said. "I never said one word about it."

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"Your sketches of the young and old Elvis told me. Those sketches don't look much alike, but the same personality shines through each. The before-and-after pictures of Eliza aren't like that, because the twins lived such different lives—one growing up in poverty, angry and defensive; the other growing up in a stable home that built her confidence. Losing two hundred pounds would make Bessie look more like Eliza in some ways, but it wouldn't erase all the traces of the hardships she endured during her early years."

"That's like your book, isn't it?" Brock said. "It was non-verbal stuff that made you realize the before-and-after pictures were of different people."

"I should have noticed verbal clues, too," Leah admitted. "I should have realized that the way Eliza speaks doesn't match the life she'd supposedly lived, or the way her mother speaks. Eliza's even careful about pronoun agreement—is it likely that she's a dropout, or that she was raised by Susan Perkins? I was so struck by the physical resemblance between Eliza and Susan that I didn't notice the verbal discrepancies. The way Bessie speaks, though—that matches up with Susan perfectly. The same vocabulary, the same sentence patterns—it's especially clear when they're angry."

"So then you realized that we'd got the Find My Folks business backwards," Brock said. "Eliza wasn't a birth parent being tracked down by an adopted child; she was the adopted child, and she'd done the tracking. Pretty clever, Mrs. Abrams."

"There was other evidence too," Leah said. "Well, not evidence, but when I was watching the Purim play, I started to wonder if Eliza might be like Queen Esther—a woman elevated to a high position but afraid to reveal her identity, afraid the man she loved would turn against her if she did. How is Ashton Travis handling all this?"

"Pretty well, I think," Brock said. "He waited at the station for Eliza—or Victoria, or whatever—the whole time we were questioning her, and they left together afterwards. Who knows? Maybe they'll make it. And Mr. Mulligan hung around till we finished with his wife, and Mrs. Perkins was fussing over both her daughters like crazy."

"I'm glad they're sticking together," Leah said. "Did James Whitman confess?"

Brock shook his head. "Not him. Too tough, too smart, too much money to pay too many lawyers. The D.A. thinks we got a strong case, though."

"And will there be a case brought against the Perkins family," Sam asked, "for deceiving the public with the Eat-to-Live Center?"

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"For fraud, you mean? I dunno—that's not my department. But whether or not there's a criminal case, you can bet some clients will sue."

"And I bet they'll win," Sam said, "as they should. Well, the Perkinses still have Bessie's Bakery; maybe they'll make a big success of that. That would be ironic—make one fortune helping people get thin, make another fortune tempting them to get fat. Are they closing the Eat-to-Live Center right away?"

"Oh, yeah," Brock said. "So that's another temp job you've lost, Mrs. Abrams."

"I don't mind that so much," Leah said, sighing, "but I am disappointed that the diet was a fraud. I really thought I could lose weight with this one. I was so impressed that the diet took its inspiration from one of Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms—'Eat to live, not live to eat.' That seemed so solid, so sensible."

"Yeah, I can see why you feel bad," Brock said, and thought for a moment. "You know, there's something else Ben Franklin once said. It was in a speech we studied in high school, a speech he gave to say the Constitution should be approved. I don't remember it word for word, but basically he said almost any form of government could be a blessing to the people if it was carried out well. Maybe that holds true for diets, too."

"Maybe it does," Sam said. "You've said the same kind of thing about teaching, Leah—a good teacher can make almost any teaching method work, and a bad teacher will do a bad job even with the best method. Maybe almost any diet works if you stick to it."

"But sticking to it is the hard part," she said, struck by the thought. "That's probably true—that's probably the secret to dieting—and on some level we probably all know that. Yet we resist the idea because we want a diet to be simultaneously more complicated and simpler—more complicated to devise, simpler to stick to. Despite all that our previous attempts have taught us, we keep hoping to find a diet so revolutionary, so perfect that it will eliminate the need for effort. That's probably true not just of dieting but also of other things. In many areas of life, we're obstructed by a contra-experiential expectation that an obfuscated infrastructure of unprecedented indefectibility can displace the self-directed, exertion-intensive behaviors needed to actualize positive outcomes in any persistent principle-adherence."

Brock grinned at her. "Sounds like a book to me," he said.

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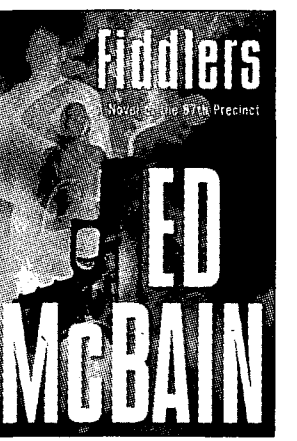
# Booked & Printed

## ROBERT C. HAHN

The ranks of distinguished and active mystery writers who are in their seventies and eighties have never been larger. The publication of new books by P. D. James (eighty-five years old) and Ed McBain (who died last year just short of his seventy-ninth birthday) testifies to the longevity and productivity of their generation of writers.

In addition to these two, there are numerous other octogenarian and septuagenarian writers whose fertile imaginations are still adding to their impressive accomplishments. Lilian Jackson Braun, author of the popular Cat Who series is eighty-nine, and her latest, *The Cat Who Dropped A Bombshell*, just came out in January. Jane Langton at eighty-three published her eighteenth Homer Kelly mystery, *Steeplechase*, last November. Other active and popular authors include Elmore Leonard and Tony Hillerman, who are both eighty, and John Mortimer, who's eighty-two. Like Elizabeth Peters, who is seventy-eight, Ruth Rendell, Donald Westlake, and Edward D. Hoch, all seventy-five, show no signs of slowing down.

Ed McBain produced an impressive number of high quality books under the McBain and Evan Hunter bylines. He published his fifty-sixth 87th Precinct book, FIDDLERS (Harcourt, $25), late last year. *Fiddlers* may not rank among the very best of 87th Precinct novels, but it has great appeal as a capstone to the series. McBain involved virtually all of the major players in the series to pursue a single thread or clue as they attempt to find a serial killer who is leaving bodies all over the city. Under the city's "First Man Up" rule, the 87th, which caught the first killing, drew the responsibility for all of the rapidly growing number of related killings.




McBain's handling of dialogue is superb and his wit as sharp as ever in this last book in the series that established the standard

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for ensemble procedurals. For the last time (barring a posthumous publication) readers can follow Steve Carella, Bert Kling, Meyer Meyer, Andy Parker, Fat Ollie Weeks, and others from the 87th, as well as their significant others.

McBain loved to tell the story of beginning the 87th Precinct novels. Beginning with *Cop Hater* in 1956, he started the series with the idea that it would have no single hero, but rather a changing cast of characters who could take the lead from one story to the next. He killed off Steve Carella in *The Pusher* (1956), the third book in the series, but McBain's agent and publisher weren't thrilled by this, since Steve Carella had already, in their minds, become the hero of McBain's series. McBain relented and changed the ending of the book, and Carella recovered and endured for another fifty years as a key character. In spite of Carella's resurrection, McBain did succeed in crafting a series where even a character like Fat Ollie Weeks, a bundle of prejudices and insensitivity, could carry the lead as he did in *Fat Ollie's Book* (2003).

In addition to his 87th Precinct books, he wrote a baker's dozen novels featuring Florida lawyer Matthew Hope, as well as many non-series novels as Ed McBain or as Evan Hunter, Curt Cannon, Ezra Hannon, or Richard Marsten. Under whatever name, Salvatore Lombino (his birth name) will be sorely missed by his fans worldwide.

A new collection of McBain's short stories, *Learning to Kill*, is scheduled for July publication by Harcourt. And there have been rumors that McBain left a final 87th Precinct book to be published after his death, but at this point, that remains simply a rumor.

Eighty-five-year-old P. D. James launched her long literary career in 1962 with *Cover Her Face*, which introduced Adam Dalgliesh, her most famous fictional creation. She also introduced female sleuth Cordelia Gray in 1972's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*—more than a decade before Sara Paretsky introduced V. I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton introduced Kinsey Millhone.

James is not the kind of author (like McBain or Leonard) who can conjure up new books at a rate that, given their quality, simply amazes. Yet she is a craftsman whose books have an elegance of form and language that readers can savor as much as the story itself. THE LIGHTHOUSE (Knopf, $25.95) is the thirteenth Dalgliesh novel in the past forty-four years. Commander Adam Dalgliesh has aged and grown in stature to the point that he is a



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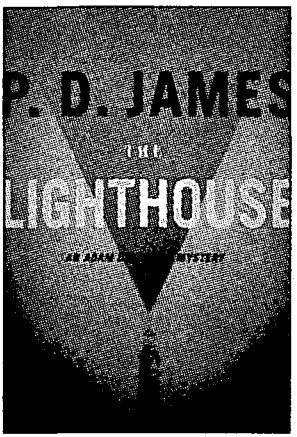
natural choice to handle the kind of sensitive situation that arises in this latest installment.

The Island of Combe off the coast of Cornwall is an isolated and exclusive haven that offers peace and security for its special and often high-profile guests. The suspicious death of author Nathan Oliver, one of the guests on the island, is enough to cause Dalgliesh to be dispatched there with only two aides and instructions to resolve the matter as quickly and quietly as possible.




The setting is perfect for James—there are a limited number of suspects (the idea of someone from outside being responsible is easily quashed), and with limited manpower, the situation requires tact, intelligence, and discernment. Dalgliesh chooses Detective Inspector Kate Miskin and Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith to accompany him. Their abilities and their relationship will play key roles as their leader is forced to rely on them more than he might have expected.

James's characters and settings are as always carefully developed, but it is her combination of imagery and insights delivered in sterling prose that make each novel a pleasure to the ear and mind. For example, a formidable lady in a dispute over a Scrabble game observes that: "We play by our own rules. Whatever is not forbidden is allowable. That is in accordance with the sound principle of English law that everything is permissible unless legally prohibited, compared with the practice in mainland Europe, where nothing is permitted unless legally sanctioned."

The productivity and excellence of these senior authors should be both an encouragement and an inspiration us all.

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# DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 18. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the June issue. The solution to last month's logic puzzle is on page 128.

| DEFINITIONS | WORDS |
|---|---|
| A. "I Do," usually | 212 48 72 108 82 12 150 164 |
| B. It's often instant | 186 8 22 214 136 180 206 |
| C. Laments | 187 42 123 89 75 64 152 |
| D. Einstein, derisively: slang | 65 113 161 99 122 142 84 |
| E. Keeping back | 140 173 66 19 28 95 126 49 196 |
| F. Enraptures | 162 194 47 213 94 146 61 |
| G. The Serengeti, to its fauna | 77 31 87 182 3 189 73 |
| H. Warrant | 120 32 101 163 139 69 7 183 201 |
| I. Game with stakes | 144 10 190 97 63 167 154 83 203 25 |
| J. Iknaton's spouse | 171 85 210 195 104 118 134 76 198 |
| K. Change indicator | 157 78 137 191 179 36 26 107 11 |
| L. More than modifies | 43 41 103 166 35 2 205 129 119 |
| M. Jumbo shrimp, e.g. | 68 131 184 59 88 121 114 175 |
| N. Hardly snubs | 90 110 13 67 209 39 204 |
| O. Offbeat | 27 9 34 130 181 193 202 159 52 |
| P. Not too acute | 176 116 23 98 169 143 153 14 37 |
| Q. Local civil employee | 128 91 117 188 208 138 46 4 |
| R. French export | 192 124 178 45 172 74 132 207 60 15 |



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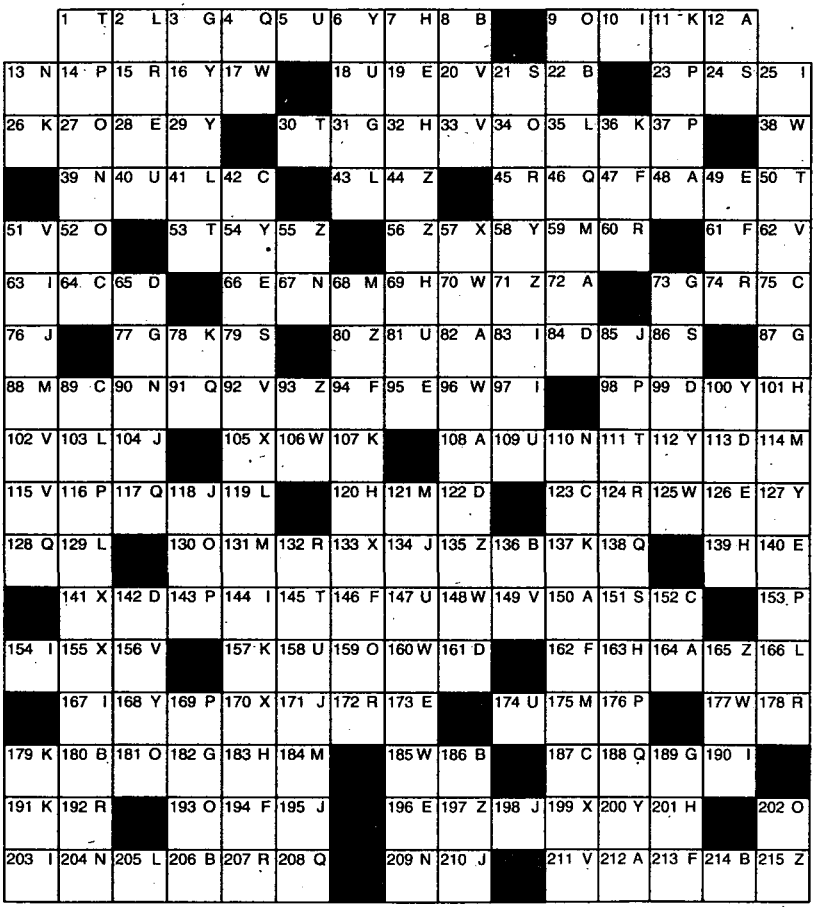


**S.** Baker of baseball

**T.** Of correspondence and such

**U.** Rush through quickly

**V.** Slowly: 3 wds.

**W.** Solanum plant

**X.** Assuages

**Y.** Document addressed to a see

**Z.** Quarrel

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 86 | 21 | 79 | 151 | 24 | | | | | |
| 1 | 145 | 50 | 111 | 53 | 30 | | | | |
| 109 | 40 | 5 | 81 | 158 | 147 | 174 | 18 | | |
| 51 | 115 | 62 | 92 | 20 | 156 | 149 | 33 | 211 | 102 |
| 160 | 70 | 148 | 106 | 185 | 17 | 177 | 38 | 125 | 96 |
| 105 | 155 | 133 | 141 | 170 | 57 | 199 | | | |
| 100 | 54 | 6 | 29 | 168 | 16 | 58 | 127 | 112 | 200 |
| 55 | 165 | 44 | 80 | 93 | 197 | 215 | 135 | 56 | 71 |

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# SHANKS ON THE PROWL

## ROBERT LOPRESTI

When the doorbell rang, Leopold Longshanks tried to convince himself it was just a bad dream. The third ring persuaded him the real world was indeed clamoring for his attention.

He looked over at Cora, who remained blissfully unaware of the rudeness of late-night visitors. She hadn't stirred when he came home at midnight, and she wasn't moving now.

Shanks put on a bathrobe and stumbled down to his front door. Through the peephole he saw a police officer in uniform. She was a youngster, under thirty, but had already perfected the cop look, bored and alert at the same time.

He pulled the robe tighter and opened the door. "Mrff?" he said. It was two A.M., after all.

"Excuse me, sir," said the cop. "Could you come with me for a minute? Your car has been prowled."

His response was automatic. "Is that a transitive verb?"

She met him frown for frown. "Excuse me?"

"I don't think *prowl* is transitive. You can prowl, or you can be *on* the prowl, but you can't prowl a car. Just like you can't *smile* a car. Intransitive verbs don't take an object."

The cop sighed, or maybe she was just taking a deep breath. "Sir, your car has been broken into. Would you come with me?"

He would, but first he went back upstairs and threw on some clothes. Cora still didn't wake up, even when he accidentally slammed a drawer shut. Twice.

Shanks's house had a two-car garage, but only one car could fit in because the other side was stuffed with exercise machines, boxes of old clothes, and all the other barnacles that couples accumulate if they aren't smart enough to move or divorce every few years.



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Hank Blaustein

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His car was in the driveway that night, because he had been at his semimonthly poker game, which Cora always called "boys' night out," with an emphasis on *boys*. She thought a man in his fifties should be beyond such things.

He accompanied the cop—Officer Dereske, she told him—to his Toyota, where everything seemed normal.

Shanks looked over his shoulder at her. "Are you sure someone broke into the car?"

She nodded. "We caught them down at the end of the block, Mr. Longshanks. They—"

"Call me Shanks. Everyone does."

"The burglars had a jimmy. That's a device for slipping into car windows to unlock—"

"I know what it is." In answer to her curious expression he shrugged. "I'm a writer. Mostly mystery novels."

"Oh. Have I heard of you?"

The only appropriate answer to that classic question was "How the hell do I know?" and that didn't seem the right thing to say to a cop, even at two in the morning. He shrugged again.

He opened the car door and looked around the interior. "My CD case is gone. It holds about a dozen CDs. All jazz, if you're trying to sort the loot."

Officer Dereske made a note. "Anything else?"

"Nothing obvious. Oh, I usually keep some change here, for parking meters. Less than a buck."

"How about the trunk?"

There was nothing in it but a set of jumper cables, which was how he remembered it.

Shanks frowned, thinking about what the cop had said. "If you caught the burglars down the street, how do you know they visited my house?"

"After we caught them we brought in the police dogs."

He stared at her. "To do what? You had already caught them."

"We had the dogs smell the suspects. Then they followed the trail up the hill and showed us each house where the suspects stopped."

Shanks shook his head. That would never have occurred to him. Use the dogs to chase down a bad guy, sure. But start with the bad guy and trace their path *backwards*? He had no idea that police dogs could be switched into reverse, so to speak.

How could he fit that fact into his latest book?

They started back toward his front door. Shanks was thinking about what he was supposed to be feeling now. He had done enough research on crime to know that he was supposed to be full

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of anger and a sense of violation: these punks had invaded his personal space, and so on.

Actually, what he felt was fascination. Imagine strolling down a street in the middle of the night, burgling cars. And then there were the trail-sniffing dogs. This was all far too interesting to waste time getting angry over.

He supposed they wouldn't let him meet the burglars. Too bad. He'd love to interview them.

Officer Dereske was getting a message over her radio. She frowned, then shrugged. "Could you spare us a few more minutes, Mr. Longshanks? My sergeant wants to talk to you."

Shanks and Cora lived at 80 Lenape Hill Road, near the top of a long, steep block. Officer Dereske explained that the bad guys, a couple of teenagers, had parked at the bottom of the hill, walked to the top, and started working their way down the west side of the street—Shanks's side.

"My partner and I were on patrol and caught them with one house left on the block."

There were several police cars down there now, and a steady flow of people moved back and forth between the houses on this side. Most of them were residents, Shanks noted, accompanied by cops. He was glad he had changed out of his bathrobe.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know," admitted Officer Dereske.

The center of the action was the last house on the block. The owners had turned on a floodlight that lit up the driveway, and a police Humvee was parked in the middle of it. Police were leading residents to and away from that circle of light.

When Shanks arrived, the man in charge was just finishing with Ben Canote, who lived at 86 Lenape Hill Road. Shanks and Canote were neighbors, but not friends. They had had words on several occasions, usually about Ben's habit of calling city hall whenever anyone on the block let grass get an inch too long or music a decibel too loud. Shanks had no patience for bullies.

"Hi, Shanks." Canote was smirking exactly like a schoolboy who had just tattled on a classmate.

"Good evening, Ben. The bad guys get anything from you?"

"Me? Not with the alarm system on *my* car. How about you?"

"The crown jewels. It's bankruptcy court for me." He liked joking with Canote because Canote never got it.

The man in charge introduced himself as Sergeant Rice. After a

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few details about where Shanks lived and what he had lost, the sergeant looked thoughtful. "You're a writer, Mr. Longshanks?"

"That's right."

"A *crime* writer, I understand."

"Mostly crime fiction, yes."

Rice nodded. "I wonder if you can tell me what this is." He walked to the back of the police SUV where two canvas bags lay. "These are what the two suspects were carrying. We've taken everything out, as you can see. But take a look at this."

The sergeant flipped back a tarp, revealing seven pounds of black steel designed for killing things.

"Wow," said Shanks.

"Can you identify it, sir?"

"It looks like an M4 rifle."

"That's right, sir. It is an M4." Rice was impressed, or pretended to be. "You seem to know a lot about guns."

Shanks shrugged. "I have to know something about them in my line of work. There are people out there who read mystery novels for no reason except to catch mistakes in the descriptions of guns. If you get one word wrong they'll e-mail you for months about it." He spoke from bitter experience.

"So, do you own an M4, sir?"

"I don't own any guns. When I want to try one out I go to a target range. Is it even legal for a civilian to own one of these things?"

"No, sir. But the young men we arrested say they found it in the trunk of one of the cars in this neighborhood."

Shanks blinked. "On Lenape Hill Road? Semiautomatic, illegal *guns?*"

The sergeant nodded.

"Which car?"

"That's the question. The dogs indicate that they stopped at at least eight houses. But the youngsters don't remember which one had the gun."

"It wasn't mine, if that's what you're thinking," said Shanks. "Are these burglars telling the truth?"

Sergeant Rice smiled wryly. "Oh, they'd be happy to cooperate if it meant less trouble for them. These aren't master criminals. They're stoned teenagers with too much time on their hands. But they're so eager to cooperate they each named a different house. If it went to court . . ." He stopped and shook his head.

Shanks understood. The two young men had essentially said, You tell us which car you think it was, and we'll agree with you. If the cops took them to a district attorney with that story, and if the D.A. was honest, he wouldn't be able to put either one of

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them on the stand. But if the cops could independently confirm which house it was, they could make sure the report reflected reality.

"Do any of your neighbors own guns?" Rice asked.

Shanks thought hard. He gazed around at the dark houses, and the shadowy figures still pacing up and down the hill. Suburbia, he thought. I've lived in this house for ten years, and half the people on the block I wouldn't recognize by face or name.

"The Cabrizzi family," he said at last. "I know they're sport fishermen. I don't know if they hunt, as well."

"And where do they live?"

Shanks pointed across the street.

"No, sir. The kids say, and the dogs agree, that they stayed on the west side of the block. *Your* side. Any suggestions about the houses on this side?"

He had none. As tempting as it was to think of a reason to point them at Ben Canote, he drew a blank. "Where there's one gun there might be more. A search warrant—"

The sergeant shook his head. "For half a dozen houses, because one of them maybe had a gun? No judge is gonna go for that. Hell, no judge *should*."

He sighed and pulled out a card. "If you think of anything, give me a call, Mr. Longshanks."

He saw Dereske coming down the hill as he walked up. "Have any of the houses been eliminated, Officer?"

She frowned. "You aren't going to play detective, are you, sir?"

"God forbid. Good night."

When he walked inside he found Cora standing in the hallway in her bathrobe. "Shanks, it's three in the morning. Aren't you a little too old to be out all night playing cards?"

"I was home hours ago, dear."

"Then what were you doing outside? And who was that other voice I heard?"

He sighed. "That was a police officer. My car was prowled."

Cora frowned. "Is that a transitive verb?"

She was a writer too, after all.

At a more civilized hour, Shanks told her the whole story over a late breakfast. "Machine guns? On Lenape Hill Road?"

"Only one gun," he corrected. "And a machine gun is fully automatic. Technically, an M4—"

"Don't nitpick, Shanks. You know what I'm saying. It's crazy. This neighborhood, well, it should be *my* territory, not yours."

He knew what she meant. Cora wrote romances, not mysteries.

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"I'm afraid we can't rely on crime to stay in the mean streets downtown anymore." He stood up. "I'm going for a little walk. Do you want to come?"

Cora shuddered. "Out in the combat zone? No, thank you. I'll go back to wrestling with my publisher's new copy editor. He's dangerous enough."

So Shanks walked alone, up and down the block, looking at the cars and houses, thinking about the neighbors he knew and the ones he didn't know at all.

There's no point in pretending I understand these people well enough to guess who would own an illegal gun, much less who would leave it in the trunk of a car, Shanks thought. But there are things I do know.

When he came back, Cora was busy in her office. Shanks went to his own and called police headquarters. He asked to speak to Officer Dereske.

"I'm just going off duty," she said. "You should talk to Sergeant Rice. He's in charge of the case."

"I'll tell you, and you can tell him. I think you'll find the gun came from 64 Lenape Hill Road."

There was a pause. "What have you been up to, Mr. Longshanks?"

"Just walked up and down the street. Last time I checked I don't need a badge for that."

Another sigh. "All right. Why do you think it was that house?"

"Process of elimination. The burglars started at the top of the block, which is 100 Lenape Hill, right?"

"I think so."

"Well, they didn't find the gun at the first house."

"Why not?"

"Because it *was* the first house. That would be easy to remember."

The cop sounded thoughtful. "Okay. I guess that makes sense."

"And the next house is where the hippies live."

"The what?"

"Hippies. I don't know their names, but the husband wears a ponytail with his business suit. And they always have a peace sign made out of Christmas lights on their front door in December."

"And you think because they put up a peace sign they wouldn't own a gun?" The scorn in her voice was clear.

"No, I think the car in their driveway is a Volkswagen Beetle. An original from the seventies, not the remake."

"So?"

"So, the trunk is in the *front*, and the engine's in the back. The

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thieves would remember that, don't you think?"

There was a pause. "Go on."

"Next is Ben Canote's house. He always brags about his car alarm, among other things. I assume the thieves saw the flashing light on the dashboard and skipped his car. Otherwise the whole neighborhood would have heard it."

"That makes sense."

"Next is my house. I know the gun wasn't there, but I don't suppose that convinces you."

"Probably not. Go ahead with the others."

**Art imitates life because life doesn't sue for plagiarism.**

"The Sprewells on the other side of my house have an SUV. Your burglars may have taken stuff out of the back, but they wouldn't call that a *trunk.*"

"Good point. Keep going."

"Next is 64 Lenape Hill. That's got to be the house with the gun. As I recall, a woman lives there with her son. He's eleven or twelve. I don't know which of them would own an M4."

"Okay, go on."

"The next house has a pickup truck."

"No trunk."

"Exactly. And the next one was the last one before they got caught, right?"

"I think so."

"They'd remember if they found the gun at the last house, wouldn't they?"

There was silence for a moment. "That all *sounds* good. I don't know if it will hold up."

"Well, run it past Sergeant Rice. And leave me out of it, okay?"

"Why do you want to be left out?"

"I don't want my neighbors to think I'm spying on them. Some of them are hard enough to get along with as it is."

"You realize that means we will be concentrating our investigation on two houses. Yours and—" She shuffled papers. "The Eickwerths. That's the name of the family at 64 Lenape Hill."

"Pry away," said Shanks. "I can take the heat."

He spent the rest of the morning rewriting a chapter of his latest book. Now, when one of the minor villains was killed, Inspector Cadogan had the brilliant idea of having police dogs follow the bad guy's trail back to the hideout.

Art imitates life because life doesn't sue for plagiarism.

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After several productive hours, Shanks found himself struggling with a comma that might or might not belong in a line of dialog. He decided it was time to take a break.

Cora was on the phone, no doubt telling a friend about the suburban submachine gun. Shanks went out to check the mail.

Glancing down the block, he spotted three police cars. Sure enough, they were centered in front of 64 Lenape Hill Road.

None of my business, Shanks thought, but he was already heading down the street. He passed the scene of the crime, as he now thought of it, and proceeded to the end of the block, just a resident out for a stroll in his neighborhood. On the way back up—and why did the hill get steeper every year?—he spied a familiar woman coming out of 64.

"Officer Dereske, don't you ever go off duty?"

She looked at him, startled. "Special circumstances, Mr. Longshanks."

Dereske looked over her shoulder, and led him farther away from the cars. "I don't think you'll have to worry about us investigating you."

"The Eickwerths confessed?"

She nodded. "That twelve-year-old son you remembered is nineteen, by the way."

"Really?" Shanks's bushy eyebrows rose. "Time does fly."

"As soon as we put a little pressure on Ms. Eickwerth, let her know we had eliminated most of the houses—" Dereske didn't quite meet his eye. "Well, she caved. Her son owned the gun. She wouldn't let him bring it in the house."

"Which is why it was in the car. Did he explain why he had the damned thing in the first place?"

The cop shrugged. "He claimed he wanted to start a business selling things over the Internet. He says he didn't know some of them were illegal to own, much less to sell that way."

"*Some* of them? What are we talking about?"

She thought about it; then shrugged again. "You'll read it in the paper, I guess. He had other things in the basement that his mother didn't know about."

"Guns?"

"Guns, silencers, some other stuff." She smiled suddenly. "More things you don't want to know about in your neighborhood, I guess."

"Too true. Well, I'm glad you solved it. Nice meeting you." He turned toward home.

"Mr.—Um, Shanks."

He turned around. "Yes?"

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Dereske was frowning. "I think I was rude to you. That line about you playing detective."

"Oh. You were just doing your job."

"Yes, I was. But why did you give the information to me, instead of to Sergeant Rice?"

Shanks scratched his chin. "Is it going to help your career?"

"It certainly won't hurt. But why me?"

"Ah. That was by way of apology." He shrugged. "I checked the dictionary. It turns out 'prowl' is sometimes a transitive verb. If you can prowl a dark alley, I suppose you can prowl a blue Toyota as well."

He found Cora in the kitchen, cooking dinner. By the look of the ingredients it was vegetarian, and no doubt nutritious, but it smelled pretty good anyway.

"Anything interesting in the mail?" she asked.

"Only if you need more credit cards. But there are police cars in front of that green house down the block. Apparently, they're the ones who owned the gun."

"The Eickwerths? How old is that boy now, seventeen?"

"Nineteen." Shanks sat down at the kitchen table. "Cora, we have to get to know our neighbors better."

"I'm way ahead of you." She continued to chop parsnips, or turnips. Whatever they were. "Look on the table."

Shanks looked. She had written up an invitation for a meeting at their house to discuss holding a block party.

"Perfect. You're brilliant as well as beautiful."

"And a hell of a cook." She dropped garlic into a pan. "Is the date all right?"

He checked. She had scheduled the meeting for the night of his next poker party, which he would have to skip.

Shanks sighed. "It's fine, dear."

They didn't know their neighbors, but they knew each other pretty well.

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# REEL CRIME

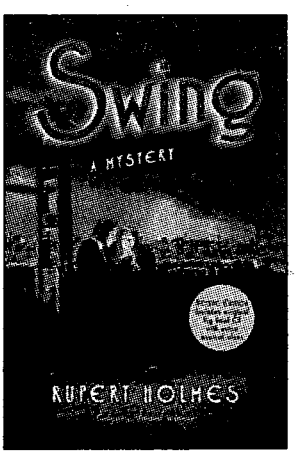
## STEVE HOCKENSMITH

If you've never heard of Rupert Holmes's 1970s story-ballad "The Humphrey Bogart Song," there's a good reason: It doesn't exist. But even if it did, there's still a chance you wouldn't know it. Somehow the lines "If you like Humphrey Bogart/And getting caught in the rain" just don't have the ear-catching magic of a Top Forty fave.

Holmes changed the lyrics at the last minute, however, replacing Bogie with a fruity cocktail. The result—"Escape (The Piña Colada Song)"—may have been a huge hit, but it was the original version that truly came from the heart.

Rupert Holmes hates piña coladas. And he loves Bogart—and anything else with even the slightest connection to the mystery genre.

And that love has expressed itself in a lot more ways than discarded lines from soft-rock pop songs. Holmes single-handedly wrote the music, lyrics, and script (or "book" in theaterese) for the Tony Award-winning smash *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which turned Charles Dickens's unfinished final novel into a musical comedy with an ending chosen by the audience. Among his numerous other stage credits are the comic thriller *Accomplice* and the twist-filled one-man play *Solitary Confinement*. And he's written two mystery novels, last year's *Swing* (which came packaged with a CD of original big band songs laced with hidden clues) and his highly praised 2003 literary debut *Where the Truth Lies*.




Holmes's first book didn't just give him the chance to play with his favorite genre in yet another medium. Thanks to a film adaptation last year, he can finally challenge Howard Stern's self-proclaimed status as "King of All Media." (Holmes already conquered television with *Remember WENN*, the nostalgia-drenched,



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mid-'90s dramedy he created for the American Movie Classics network.)

Brought to the screen by writer/director Atom Egoyan (who's best known for such gloomy, disturbing indie fare as *Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*), *Where the Truth Lies* stars Kevin Bacon and Colin Firth as a Lewis and Martin-esque comedy team broken apart by a groupie's mysterious death. Though the plot was transferred to the screen more or less intact, almost nothing survived of the book's *feel*: The novel is sly and satirical; "moody" and "dark" better describe Egoyan's adaptation (which hit home video in late February).

*Atom Egoyan and Kevin Bacon on the set of* Where the Truth Lies. *Photo by Rafy.*

"It's a different creation," Holmes acknowledges.

Perhaps because he's been on the other side of the adaptation equation (thanks to *Edwin Drood* and other projects, such as an upcoming musical based on *The First Wives' Club*, for which he's writing the book), Holmes knew his novel couldn't be brought to the screen without big changes.

"A lot of the humor in the book comes from [the wisenheimer first-person] narration," he points out. "So the second you make a movie, you loose that, and all that comedy vanishes."

Though the shift in tone came as no surprise to Holmes, Egoyan's interest in his novel did. Without Holmes's knowledge, one of his agents sent *Where the Truth Lies* to Egoyan, and the director took it upon himself to call Holmes directly once he'd read it.

"I looked at caller ID and it said, 'Egoyan, Atom,' " Holmes recalls with a laugh. "I thought, Why is *he* calling *me*? Is he raising money for his next film?"

A movie fan (as well as a lore-laden raconteur on almost every facet of pop culture), Holmes knew Egoyan's oeuvre well—and couldn't see how his novel could possibly fit into it. Strip away the surface humor, and the book's a guided tour through the depths (and they were *deep*) of show business sleaziness in the 1960s and '70s. Egoyan's films, on the other hand, tend to focus on the quiet desperation of everyday people struggling with issues like loss, identity, and sexual obsession.

"Most of the book is set in nightclubs and casinos and movie sets and swank hotel rooms," Holmes says. "[Egoyan] isn't the first person I would've thought of [to adapt it]. But then I thought,


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He writes and directs films about illusions and secrets and sexual predators. I can see where this story has all those components."

Holmes pauses for a moment, then cuts loose with a hearty, self-deprecating chuckle.

Where the Truth Lies. © *THINKFilm Company Inc.*

"Then again," he adds, "if the pope called me and said, 'Your novel is the quintessence of everything I'm trying to communicate to the world,' I'd probably say, 'Yeah, I can see that. That gunsel in chapter seven . . . he *was* kind of Christ-like, wasn't he?'"

Though he never got a call from His Holiness, Holmes did receive more surprising news regarding the adaptation of his novel: The spastic, Jerry Lewis-ish Lanny Morris would be played by the usually non-spastic (and non-kosher) Kevin Bacon, while suave Italian-American heartthrob Vince Collins would-be brought to life on screen by Colin Firth, an Englishman best known for playing the biggest tight-ass in all literature, *Pride and Prejudice's* Mr. Darcy.

"When I created Lanny Morris did I envision that I would have a Jewish character being played by an actor named *Bacon*? No," Holmes jokes. "But Kevin Bacon's one of our great actors, and I knew he was a [rock and roll musician], so he could cut it as a stand-up comic. And he pulled it off brilliantly. Colin Firth is a real stretch [as Vince Collins], but that's okay—he's a great actor too. The fact that they made Vince more of a Peter Lawford-type Rat Packer rather than a Dean Martin-type is fine. Emotionally, he hit all the right notes."

Where the Truth Lies. © *THINKFilm Company Inc.*

Certainly, no one could argue with Holmes's ear for notes: He got his start as a musician, arranger and all-around musical gun for hire. His first chart hit was the bizarre cannibal-in-a-cave-in ditty "Timothy," which took the band The Buoys into the top twenty for the first and last time in 1971. A solo album, *Widescreen*, came three years later. Though it didn't make much of a dent on the charts, it did have a big impression on an extremely important new fan: Barbra



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Streisand. Much like Egoyan years later, "Babs" ended up calling Holmes out of the blue.

"I thought it was someone pulling my leg," Holmes says. "I told her, 'That's the worst Barbra Streisand impersonation I've ever heard.'"

Fortunately, Her Fabulousness had a sense of humor. Soon, the till-then New York-based Holmes was by La Barbra's side in L.A., recording material (including the hit album *Lazy Afternoon*) and working on her remake of *A Star Is Born*. The duo eventually went their separate ways, and not long afterward Holmes got his own (brief) taste of superstardom when "Escape (The Piña Colada Song)" topped the pop charts in 1979.

*Rupert Holmes*

Holmes had a very different kind of hit in 1986 when *Edwin Drood* became the biggest theatrical award-magnet of the year. Various Broadway projects followed—and another might be on the way soon. Holmes recently wrote the book for *Curtains*, a musical/mystery debuting in L.A. this summer with *Frasier's* David Hyde Pierce in the lead. If all goes well, the production could make the leap to the Great White Way shortly thereafter.

And as if that weren't enough musical mayhem, Holmes's mystery novel *Swing* is in development as a vehicle for a Hollywood A-lister. Though Holmes can't say who just yet, he's convinced the star has the song-and-dance chops to play the novel's '40s-era crooner hero. What's more, this Star To Be Named Later has even asked Holmes to script the adaptation himself.

Whether or not the project moves forward, it's clear Holmes will keep looking for ways to combine his two loves—melodies and mysteries. He's got both in his blood: His father was a bandleader turned music teacher, while his mother's side of the family introduced him to the joys of sleuthing . . . with a little help from a certain magazine.

"I was a devoted reader of *Alfred Hitchcock* from the time I was a child," says Holmes. "My mother and grandmother read all the mystery magazines cover to cover—*AHMM, EQMM, The Saint, Mike Shayne*—so nobody ever said to me, 'You shouldn't be reading those! There's lot of blood and violence!' Which is fortunate, because now it seems like I'm always putting music and murder together."



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# All I Ever Wanted To Be

## ROBERT S. LEVINSON

All I ever wanted to be was famous.

Not too much to ask, considering how most people want to be rich.

Being famous, a less crowded field when you think about it, which I'd started doing in fifth grade, after our teacher, Mrs. Pickle (really, that was her name), took the class on a field trip to the Warner Bros. studio. How's that for excitement for a bunch of eleven year olds lined up two abreast and clutching hands on a casual march along streets and through soundstages where they were making motion pictures and television shows?

There was a lot of chatter from our tour guide, Maggie, who looked old and pretty to me, but was probably young and pretty, sort of Betty Boop pixie doll-looking, with this heart-shaped face and bee-stung lips, sparkling ocean blue eyes, and a throaty voice full of wonder and excitement, especially when she spied some famous actor or actress.

Maggie would recite their names and recite their "credits," she called them, and tell us about the awards they had won, the magazine covers they were on, and how everyone in the world loved, respected, and admired them.

Loved, respected, and admired.

Wow!

Imagine!

I wasn't getting any of that at home, nothing exclusive to me or worth sharing now, so you can believe the impact those words had on me.

Maggie would wave at the actors and most smiled and waved back.

Some even came over and shook our hands, asked us questions, signed their names on scraps of paper we dredged up from somewhere.

All the kids squealed over every bit of attention, and they got to



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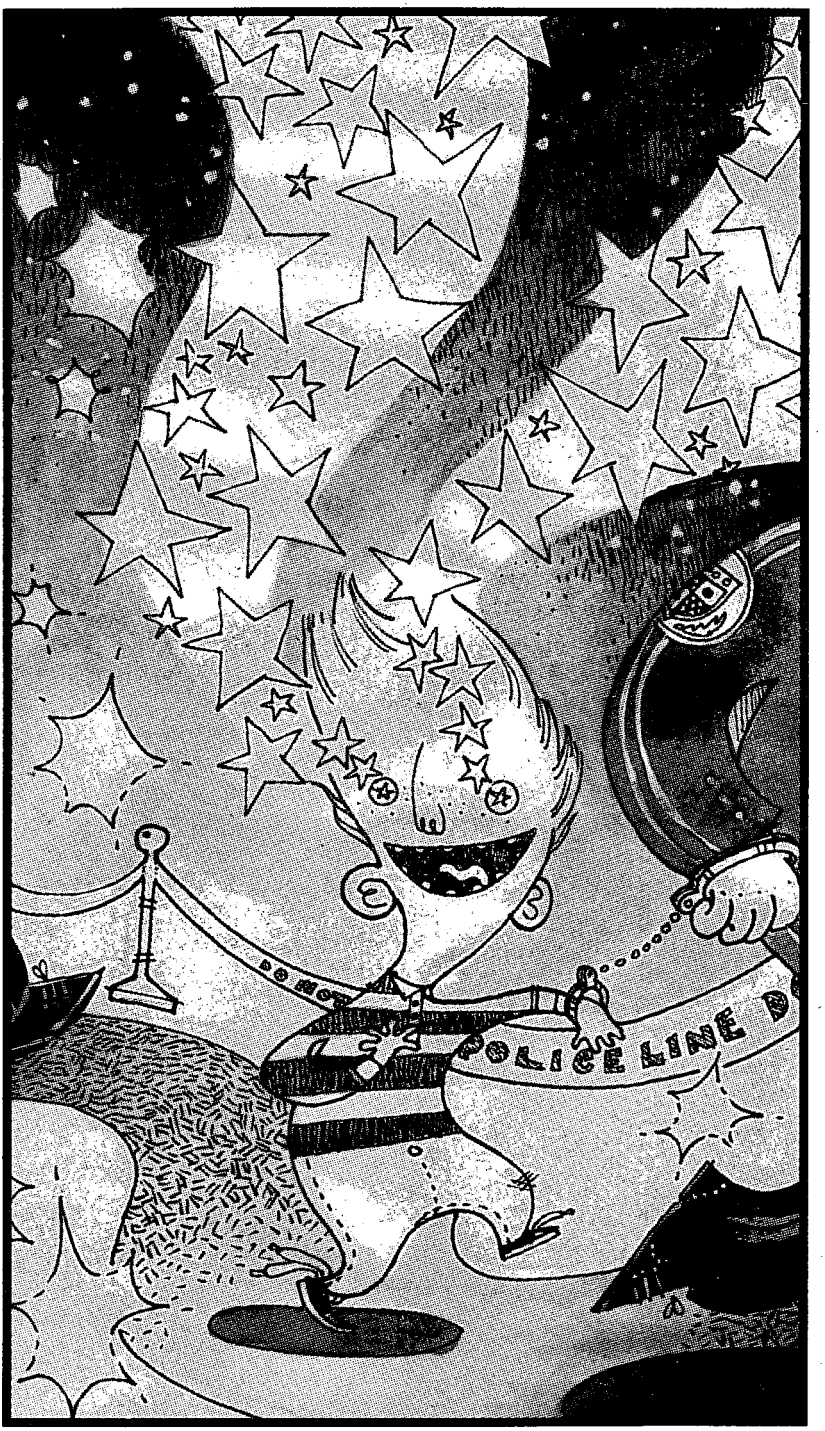


Kelly Denato

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squealing over me when the tour was almost over. It started on the outdoor set where they filmed a TV series called *Palm Springs 92262*, nothing my folks ever let me watch.

An actress Maggie said was the star of the show, so beautiful I lost my breath when I saw her, wandered over to say hello and, in a flash, had my hands caught in hers and was saying, "You remind me of my brother, little man." She kneeled to my height, and I swear I saw tears welling in her eyes in the seconds before she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me to her. She hung onto me like I was a life preserver for a while, then pressed her lips onto my forehead, released me, and raced away before I could ask her to sign her name for me.

At once, all the kids had crowded around me in awe that Shelby Butterfield—that was her name—had singled me out. Urging me to share with them everything she'd said to me. Wondering how it felt to be touched by Shelby Butterfield, have my hands held by her, and kissed—kissed!—by her. Some wanted to hold my hands the way Shelby had. Tommy Scheuer wondered what the kiss felt like and tried to put his lips over where hers had been. Jerry Ludwig pushed paper and a pencil at me and wanted my autograph, since he had not been able to get hers.

My autograph!

The next day at Adams Boulevard Elementary, the news about Shelby and me had spread like one of those Laurel Canyon fires—whoosh!—and I could not get anywhere on the playground without kids staring and pointing at me, even coming up to me and asking questions, like how I'd felt about meeting Shelby, or did I know her before the tour, or was it true what they were hearing, that Shelby and I were related? There was more of the same at lunchtime, only by now there were kids hoping for confirmation that Shelby and I were cousins, maybe? Brother and sister? Separated years ago and seeing each other for the first time since?

The stories grew like Jack's beanstalk.

They wouldn't go away.

In my own way, I was famous now, where before I was ignored, passed over as the school fool—what they all called me behind my back and sometimes even to my face, *The School Fool*—with no real friends. I don't know why that had been, any more than I knew what made my life at home so miserable, with a mom and dad who barely knew I was alive and sometimes seemed to wish otherwise.

Everybody at school wanted to be my friend after Shelby.

Even Janey Post, the most popular girl in class, who was too snooty to even make faces at me, going all the way back to first

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grade. The first time, she squiggled into a seat next to me at a school assembly. She asked me the usual Shelby questions until the lights went down and the movie started, when she took my hand and moved it to breasts hardly more real than my imagination and whispered, "I bet Shelby never let you touch her like I'm doing." Who wouldn't be in love after that? Janey said she loved me too, and that was the rest of it, the love to go with the admiration and respect my fame had brought me.

Sixth grade and I was still being asked questions, like had I seen Shelby lately and what did we talk about and did Shelby reveal what would be happening next week on *Palm Springs 92262?*

I had taught myself to answer any and every question in a way that let them believe whatever they wanted to believe, fearful that doing otherwise would lose me the attention I had come to crave.

The fame I needed the way any addict needs his daily fix.

I even changed my name to Fame in my mind, Archie Fame, and practiced writing it in my three-ring binder so I'd be ready to sign elegant, distinguished autographs when I was older and achieve love, admiration, and respect outside the rusted wrought-iron gates of Adams Boulevard Elementary School.

It didn't happen the way I figured it might, Archie Fame starring in movies and on television and, every chance Archie got, paying back Shelby Butterfield in the best way he knew how, by being nice to any kids who might wander on the set looking lonely, lost, and in need of a friend.

Dickie Corona changed all that after his family moved into the neighborhood from New York, after halfway through sixth grade. He was a cool dude and all, good with books and on the ball field, and caught on quick with everyone, even me at first.

That changed after Dickie heard about Shelby and me.

I confirmed everything and, anxious to impress him and win him over, let him in on the real secret, that Shelby Butterfield was not my secret sister. I told him she was actually my real mom. I was the love child Shelby had when she was still a teenager and was forced to give up for adoption the year before she ran away from home and came to Hollywood to be discovered.

Dickie told this to his dad, who, I learned later, was out here to work as a producer on *Deep Dish Hollywood.*

His dad figured it for a story worth telling on the program and sent a crew to the set of *Palm Springs 92262.*

It wasn't the story he came away with.

The story was Shelby Butterfield denying everything I'd told Dickie, pretending she didn't even remember who I was. Me—when they found me at school and shoved a camera and a micro-

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phone in my face—looking lost and confused. Kids saying mean things, Janey the most hurtful, all of them back to calling me The School Fool. My mom and dad telling *Deep Dish Hollywood* I was mentally sick and needed help worse than ever, and when the people were gone, my mom and dad back to whupping me something fierce for the shame I had heaped on the family.

It wasn't all bad, though. My name and my picture were all over the news, and not just in the United States. I was famous all over the world. I even saw stories about me in those newspapers and magazines they sell at the market checkout counter down the street, some saying I'd been telling the truth all along and Shelby should confess as much.

I liked that idea, about her confessing.

If she did, it could get the kids back to liking me again.

About a month later, when nobody was talking about me anymore on the news, I decided to go to the Warner Bros. studios and talk to Shelby.

What was another day of ducking school, anyway?

I caught a couple of buses into Hollywood and hitched the rest of the way into the valley and over to the studio. I circled the lot until I came across an old brick wall crumbling at the seams, and crawled inside through a hole barely wide enough for a baby pig. After about an hour of wandering around and trying not to draw attention, I found the soundstage where they did *Palm Springs 92262*.

Better than that, across the broad, asphalted alley from the soundstage door and a flashing red gizmo was a giant house trailer with a painted sign in the door slot that had Shelby Butterfield's name next to a gold star.

I tried the door when nobody answered my knocking.

It was unlocked. I stepped inside, my eyes roaming, and called for her, but she wasn't there.

That's what I thought until I heard a flushing noise and water running, and Shelby stepped out from the bathroom, naked.

I don't know who was more surprised.

I was too dumbstruck to answer when she said, "Who the hell are you?" and then "What the hell are you doing in here?" The expressions on her face flashed surprise first, then alarm, then relaxed into curiosity and, finally, screwed up into anger.

"You're the damn little runt who gave me so much grief," she said.

"What I came to talk to you about," I said.

"Just go, damn you," she said, shaking her fist at me.

"I really need to talk to you something fierce."

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Shelby whooshed out a ton of air and threw a finger at the door. "Go!"

"Please, Mom, it won't—"

"What did you call me, you crazy little—?" She charged at me with claws for fingers, like she was aiming for my throat.

I was scared. My dad did that once, got me good, almost choked the life from me, but decided to blacken an eye and crack my jaw instead after I managed to reach his wine bottle and christened his head with it.

I moved super fast, angling out of Shelby's way.

Her feet tangled on something, throwing her head back.

I heard a noise that sounded like a fish snapping at bait.

She hung suspended on invisible wires before stumbling forward.

She crashed into the windshield and bounced backward on her heels, the base of her skull slamming onto the metal edge of the service counter before she did a full-circle twist and landed face down on the lush white carpeting that promptly took on a crimson stain.

I knew she was dead, but asked anyway. "Shelby, you okay? Mom, are you?"

She was dead, and a wet stream was running down my pant leg.

I had to get out of there fast, or they were going to find me and think I had killed her and—

I smiled, stretching my mouth so wide my cheeks began aching.

Her cell phone was on the dining table.

I reached for it and dialed 911.

That night I was back on the news. Within days a dozen theories were circulating about how Shelby Butterfield's death had happened and my role in it. I wasn't helping out any, not even the public defender the police got for me. I figured my silence would help to fuel the old controversy about whether she was my mother or what, and create a lot of new ones. Mom and Dad have had calls from people wanting to write a book and there's already a movie in the works, they said. Meanwhile, they are making a bundle talking about me to the press, so they're happy with me for a change and thinking they might even come away from all this with a million bucks.

Fine by me.

Most people want to be rich.

All I ever wanted to be was famous.

I got a card wishing me well the other day from everybody in my class, signed even by Janey, who drew a little heart under her name. That was nice, don't you think so?

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# LINES ON THE MERMAID TAVERN

MICHELLE KNOWLDEN

Souls of Poets dead and gone
What Elysium have ye known . . .

—*John Keats*
*"Lines on the Mermaid Tavern"*

The moment the embolism burst, I saw a vision of catastrophe.

Hours earlier, I had arrived at the Mermaid Tavern, where the bartender directed me to a small room with a door to the wharf. Moonlight gleamed on the fishing lines dropping from the tavern's handrails into the harbor water. The railing was damp, and the planks smelled of fish.

"Miss Cardex?" the young Paraguayan woman inquired, then listened as I told her about my alphabetical immune disorder. She listened while I listed my medical history from angina to Egyptian ophthalmia. Then she took my hand and closed her eyes. She listened to the silence.

While she plotted the cure for intra-alveolar pressure, I studied her room. We sat on wooden chairs at the kitchen table. A South American cow horn, tipped with silver and filled with twigs, leaned against a kettle hissing on the old stove. Neatly folded bed linens and a pillow lay on the sofa that doubled for her bed. Dank air from the waterfront slid into the room, and mingled with the musty smell of herbs. Sheets of verse written in foreign lines covered the east wall and served as blinds on the window. A book of poetry rested on the counter, and she had taped a creased photo of a young man to the shelf above her pillow.

Paraguayan herbalists are widely known for the potent cures in their yerba maté teas. I watched Marta drop dried petals, powders, and wood shavings into the kettle. As the room filled with the earthy smell of fields and wet bark, I thought back to what had caused my latest near-death experience, leading to this dodgy waterfront tavern.



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Three weeks ago, I'd been diving while investigating an unexplained death. Not a planned dive.

My aunt, whose enthusiasm for murder is legendary, had accompanied me to where the drowning occurred. The insurance company had engaged the agency, LaMare & Cardex Investigations, to determine if the drowning was an accident or murder. Helena commandeered my cousin Robyn, from the robust side of the Cardex family, to join us, and then loaded her down with cameras, scopes, measuring tape, fingerprint kits, and flood lights. From the marina parking lot, we headed to the boat slip to meet with the victim's family. Robyn looked like a one-woman CSI unit.

The old man had been swept (or pushed) overboard on a stormy night. The ship's captain was his brother-in-law. The victim's wife had also been aboard. Neither survivor remembered when he'd gone missing and sounded the alert only later. The harbor patrol pulled him out hours later after floating face down near the boat.

The captain had offered his sister and brother-in-law a dinner cruise to celebrate their fifty-ninth wedding anniversary. The dinner wine mixed with the old man's heart medication made him woozy. He climbed out of the cabin to get some air. The other two finished cleaning up, and some time later noticed that the old man hadn't rejoined them.

It didn't take great detecting to realize that the octogenarian's death was accidental. Dizzy from a mix of alcohol and medication, the deck slick from the rain, the boat rocking, and the tentative balance of the overmedicated had sent him overboard. If the others had been on deck, perhaps they might have summoned help earlier or thrown him a life jacket, but I doubted if that would have changed the outcome. The waters in February are perilously cold.

Aunt Helena had a different theory as to what happened. She decided it was murder, and that the 84-year-old wife had bumped off her husband. To reconstruct the crime, she propelled me to the railing, and waved a boat hook threateningly. When the point swung too close to my nose, I stepped back, and arced over the railing. I heard someone shout "Micky," and then I hit the icy water.

Weighed down by thick winter clothing, I sank in a froth of bubbles and wake. I flailed wildly, but that only seemed to quicken my descent.

Wedged between tires and a splintered oar on the sandy bottom, I thought, This is it, and felt mild surprise. When suffering from an alphabetical immune disorder, you believe that it will be

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a coronary infarction or dengue fever that kills you. Poor health gives one a unique perspective about the trivial dangers of detective work. Murder and mayhem cannot compete with cholera and consumption.

As I lay among the fish, thirty-seven years flashed before me. Except for enemas and Aunt Helena, it had been a good life. My favorite uncle had left me an income that suited my invalid lifestyle. He'd also left his wife, Helena, and a condition in the trust requiring gainful employment. The latter was a surmountable problem. After all, murder investigations in Wildemark (population 4,524) should have been light work. Although more plentiful than expected, the solutions were invariably simple. The human immune system has more diverse mysteries than any murder.

As life drifted from me, a shaft of light and a body bisected the water. My cousin Robyn pulled me from the debris and towed me swiftly to the surface. The ship's crew lifted me aboard and dumped me on the hard deck. Spluttering in the rank winter air, I felt the stirrings of a cerebral gas embolism.

Weeks later, I still suffered from the lack of medical attention. Simple chamber recompression with doses of dextran and heparin would have prevented the embolism, but all ignored my weak entreaties on the boat. Now I manifested all the signs of mottling, edema, and circulatory collapse. My doctor's receptionist, an unfeeling woman, wouldn't make me an appointment for decompression sickness. In desperation, I'd gone to see the Paraguayan herbalist who practiced in the backroom of the Mermaid Tavern.

But it was too late. As the door crashed open and the healer's hand froze over maté and chrysanthemums bubbling in the kettle, I had a massive cerebral embolization and fell back on the sofa.

A formidable, whitehaired woman dressed in lavender chiffon strode into the room. Robyn followed her wearing golf gear and an irritated look on her face.

"Michaela," the voice boomed. I was startled that the vision spoke, and wondered if death was near.

"Malingering again," she said. "Why are you lounging about in this rat hole when there are killers to apprehend?"

"Excuse please," Marta said. Then lapsed into soft Guaraní.

"Speak English, girl," Helena barked.

"Aunt? Is that really you or have I perished?" My voice quavered.

"You wish," Robyn said, running a hand through her light blond hair.

Weakly I sat up. "How'd you find me?"

Helena narrowed her eyes smugly. "Your wiles are no match for

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my deductive skills. I have studied the breadth of Wildemark's police manuals and all the detective novels your late uncle owned. I examined every clue, profiled your character, interrogated witnesses . . ."

"Your secretary told us you were here," Robyn said.

Marta pressed a warm cup into my hand. It smelled of summer lawns, wild honeysuckle, and chimney soot. "Drink," she said. "Is good for breathing."

I sipped. It tasted of green things and forest mold. The warmth cleared my shriveled lungs and windpipe. The Guaraní verses papering the walls (all Ys and accents) suddenly crystallized into markings resembling dragonfly wings.

"A miracle," I whispered, and took another sip.

"Smells foul and probably costs a fortune," Robyn groused. "What's wrong with you anyway?"

"I contracted decompression sickness from my near drowning incident. For every thirty-three feet of seawater, the pressure drops an atmosphere. At one hundred feet, signs of nitrogen narcosis become evident, and at ten atmospheres, it can kill."

She frowned. "What are you talking about, Micky? There are no seas in Wisconsin, and Otis Lake is only eight feet deep."

"I hope you weren't planning on taking advantage of my weak-minded niece," Helena said to Marta. "She's already spent this quarter's allowance on magnet therapy and has no funds for this nonsense."

Marta shook her head. "I no asking for money. We trade services. I cure her lungs. She find the one that killed my father."

"What?" Helena said.

"What?" Robyn said.

"Her father was murdered last year in California's Ventura County," I said. "Her fiancé, Celso Pichardo was accused of the crime, and fled the country before his trial. She doesn't believe Celso did it, and she's remained in the U.S. to find the real killer."

"You agreed to solve a murder for a cup of tea?" Helena's lavender chiffon rustled in outrage.

"For a medical miracle," I corrected. "Discovering the murderer will be minor in comparison."

I hoisted myself off the couch. "Let's get to work."

Marta kept the box of newspaper clippings beneath the kitchen sink. Prior to the killing, she and her father had stayed in a West Los Angeles apartment. In his native country, he wrote poetry in the mountains near Villarrica in the summers, and taught in Asunción during the winters. Celso had been his student. The poet was visiting California in a literary exchange program spon-

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sored by UCLA. What he had been doing in Ventura County was still unknown.

One of the articles showed Amós shaking the well-manicured hand of a local politician. Marta's distinguished father had the chiseled face and muscular length of the Guaraní Indian. He was simply known as Amós because he spoke for the oppressed and wrote in the language of heaven.

"He say he got a call. Someone tèll him that they have very old Guaraní story and ask him to translate. He says to me that he meets them in Santa Monica, but he never arrive. Some four days later, police find his body in a field."

According to the newspaper, he'd been shot twice in the chest. Death had been quick.

Marta pulled out another article about her father's memorial service in Brentwood. A color picture showed the local state senator patting Marta's shoulder with a mottled hand. A well-known and controversial professor of Hispanic literature was walking away from the senator with a sneer on his face. The article said that the senator was rumored to be dropping out of his reelection campaign due to money problems.

"Why did the police think your fiancé did it?" Robyn asked. She and Marta were analyzing the clippings while Helena prowled the small quarters. Sipping cold yerba maté tea from a cow horn, I lay on the couch and traced lines of her father's poetry on the wall.

"Is crazy. They think Celso poor student, think that when my father dead, then he marry me and get my father's money. Is very crazy. The family of Pichardo have much money. Big coffee money. What he need of a poet's little savings and mountain house?"

"Did the police explain?" I asked.

Marta shook her head. "No. My English only few words when my father killed. Sadness took my Spanish, and they find no one to speak the Guaraní."

"Why did you come to Wisconsin?" Robyn asked. Helena opened a cupboard and peered inside.

Marta handed me a fresh cup of maté and chrysanthemums. "I hear television show about the very smart work of Miss Micky Cardex who find killer in California when no others do. So I come here. This room only place I can pay. Is good thing Miss Cardex trade work for work."

"Michaela work?" Helena snorted. "I seriously doubt that. If anyone solves the murder, it will be me." She jammed a lavender beret on her head, its pom-poms jiggling, and flung open the door. "I'm on the case. If you need me, I'll be using the car

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phone to see if the police in California cast any tire tracks."

I saw the fishing lines dance in the water, and then the door slammed shut behind her.

"Who do you think killed Amós?" Robyn asked Marta.

Her strong face, so like her father's, hardened. She pointed to the photo of the funeral. "That one," she said, tapping the professor's picture. "Horus Ortega. He say the poetry of the Guaraní have no place in Latino literature. He try to still the voice of Amós, but he no understand the soul of the poor. The suffering."

She gently ran her hands over the pages taped to the window. "My father's words live forever in their hearts." A tear slid down her cheek. "In my heart also."

I looked at the picture of Horus Ortega and the politician. Then I used Aunt Helena's magnifying glass to take a closer look. "The senator in this picture," I said. "How did your father know him?"

Marta shrugged. "His name is Vicente Barranca. He no friend of my father. He use my father to show his love of the arts and his caring for the poor. My father tell me that Señor Barranca was corrupt like the governors in old Paraguay."

She smiled sadly. "My father say that the people of this man's district, they are very poor people. They know bad things about the senator. My father write a poem and he say that the *Times* will print it. He tell Señor Barranca that they weep in the barrios because of evil men like him. He take food from babies and old women for his own pockets. My father tell Señor Barranca that their tears would be heard." Fire filled Marta's eyes.

"And did the *Times* print his poem?" Robyn asked.

She shook her head and glowered at the photo. "No. That professor stopped him. He took it from my father. I know, because Amós had it when he go to the college that morning." Again she stabbed the picture with her finger. "That man—Professor Horus Ortega. Miss Cardex, you tell police, he murdered my father."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Marta. I can't do that. The professor didn't kill your father. Senator Vincente Barranca did." At their astonished looks, I tapped the newspaper photo. "Chiggers," I said.

"What?" Marta asked.

"What?" Robyn asked.

I pointed at the mottling on the senator's hands. "He's covered with chigger bites. Chiggers don't exist in Barranca's district, but Belkin's chiggers are plentiful in Ventura County where Amós was killed."

She snatched up the magnifying glass, stared for a long moment, and then exhaled heavily. "It is true. That murderer. See how he touch me with the hand that killed my father."

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Robyn shook her head. "He was so worried about a poem that he'd kill the poet?"

"Is a saying in my country: A politician cares only for his pockets, and it is the poets who weep." Marta nodded. "The picture tells all, yes? So now what we do?"

"First we get you to a safer place than this tavern. Robyn—any ideas?"

"She can stay at Aunt Helena's." At Marta's dubious look, Robyn said, "Not to worry—she's not there much. She spends most of her time tailing Micky."

"Then after we settle you at the mansion, we'll inform the police about the senator. Robyn, think you can get Aunt Helena off the phone to do so?"

Robyn shot out of her chair. "I'm on it." The door shut behind her.

Marta's eyes misted. "This is good thing you do, Miss Cardex. You bring justice where I have none. Now Celso have his good name again, and my father's killer pay for his blood greed. I wish I can say more than thank you."

I lifted my cup of lawn cuttings and ash. "You already have, Marta." And took a deep, embolism-free breath.

**Solution to the April "UNSOLVED"**

Karl Trump, the bomber, murdered Nate Potter, the gunman.

| FLOOR | COUPLE | PROFESSION | POSING AS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | Nate & Edna Potter | gunman | naturalist |
| 9 | Moe & Belle Osborne | cat burglar | car dealer |
| 7 | Karl & Angie Trump | bomber | merchant |
| 6 | Hank & Dolly Quillen | arsonist | haberdasher |
| 5 | Larry & Cathy Unger | drug dealer | journalist |
| 3 | Joe & Ginger Smoltz | forger | importer |
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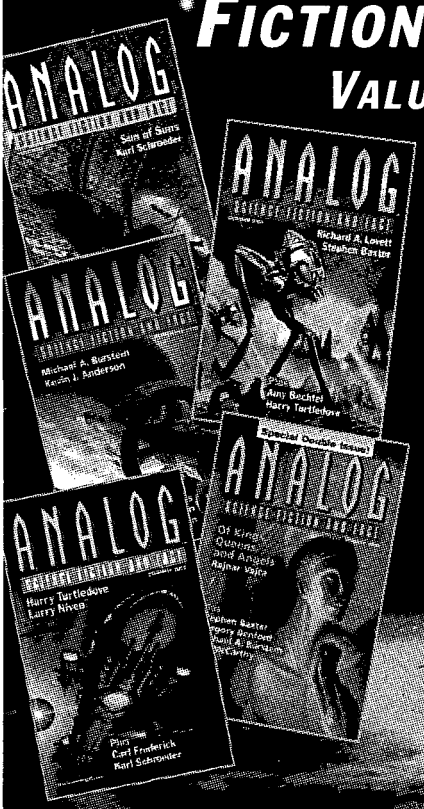


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# SIX SKINNY COFFINS

I guess even the toughest of us has some kind of weakness—something he won't admit to anybody else, and maybe not even to himself. With me, it's sentiment, especially when it comes to love; sad love. I'm a sucker for a sad love story. They break me up completely.

You take what happened to Denver Eddie and Sweet Alice, for instance. That story gave me the glooms for a week. What's worse, it cost me a couple hundred bucks, maybe more. I'll never forget the night I heard it. I'd like to, but I can't.

I was on my way to the regular weekly get-together of the exiles' club. We call it that, anyway. There are about two dozen of us here in Rio, I guess, and we're all what you might call expatriates. We like Brazil fine, you understand, but most of us are here for the sake of our health. I mean, it's kind of unhealthy in Leavenworth and Sing Sing and places like that, and even unhealthier in gas chambers and electric chairs, which is where some of us would have gone if we had stayed obvious. Anyhow, we've formed a kind of club, and once a week we get together at a private dining room in a hotel on Copacabana Beach. Mostly we just have a few drinks and swap yarns about the days when we were all back in the States.

We've got some fine boys in our little exiles' club, and some fine women too. People like Fig Lip and Johnny the Knock and Charley One and Charley Two, and Millie from Milwaukee and Slow Sue, and Willie the Weep and Seldom Seen and the Indian and several others. Me they call the Scholar, because I finished almost two years at Hanley Miller High School

Well, as I said, I was on my way to one of our little get-togethers. It wasn't quite dark yet, and I was just ambling along, enjoying the cool of the evening. Then I noticed this woman standing under a street lamp, eyeing me pretty closely, as if she were sizing me up.

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She was about sixty, I guessed, but sixty or not, I never saw a more beautiful woman in my life. At first I figured it must be the fading light, but when I got close I saw that it wasn't. She was just plain beautiful.

"Excuse me, young man," she said as I drew close. "May I speak to you a moment?" She had a beautiful voice, too—like a young woman's voice—so soft and light.

"Yes, ma'am?" I said, and waited.

"I have to trust someone with something very important," she said. Her eyes were sheened, as if she had been crying. "You have a good face. I think I can trust you. Would you do a lady a favor?"

"It depends," I said.

"It'll take you only a minute. Please say yes."

"What's the favor?" I asked.

She nodded toward a house across the street. "Someone very dear to me is over there," she said. "He's—dead. He'll be buried in the morning." She paused. "He's lying in state. The casket's open, and—and I want you to put something in it."

"You mean you want something to be buried with the body?"

"Yes. It's something that belongs to him." Her voice had begun to tremble a little. "I know how strange all this must sound to you, but it just must be buried with him. It just must be."

"Why not put it there yourself?"

"I tried, when—when I said good-bye to him."

"Said good-bye?"

"When I looked at him for the last time, just a few minutes ago. But I have arthritis. I couldn't move my arm well enough to do it."

"I see." This noncommittally.

"Please say you'll do it for me. I'll thank you all the days of my life."

"It's that important, is it?"

"It's the most important thing in the world to me. Please, *please* say you will," she begged pitifully.

"Just put it in the casket? That's all?"

"Yes. And make sure it's far enough down so that no one else will be able to see it and take it out again."

"What if somebody sees me do it? There might be trouble."

"There's no one sitting with the body. There's hardly even been anyone in there to see it. I've been the only one to go in or out in the last twenty minutes."

"What is it you want me to put in there?"

Her eyes lighted up, but there were tears in them too. "You'll do it, then?" she said, reaching into her purse. "Oh, bless you!"

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"I'm still thinking about it," I said. For some reason, I was beginning to feel a little nervous.

She took a small, round, metal object from her purse and stood gazing at it for a long moment, as if she were reluctant to give it up. Then she held it out to me quickly, her eyes averted.

"Here," she said. "And please—be sure it's down in the casket far enough not to be seen."

I turned the object over in my fingers. In the failing light it looked like silver. But it was too heavy for silver—a round, thin case about the size of a lady's compact, but much thinner, and with a beveled edge that seemed to be sealed all the way around.

"What is it?" I asked.

She just looked at me, smiling, and then compressed her lips, as if she were trying very hard not to cry.

I shrugged. "All right," I said, slipping the case—if that's what it was—into my pocket. I'll put it in the casket for you."

"Bless you," she said.

"No trouble at all," I said, and turned to cross the street toward the house she had indicated.

She'd been right about there being no one sitting with the body. The shabby livingroom was empty, with the only light coming from half a dozen big candles spaced around the casket. I got the casket between myself and the front window, in case the woman was watching me from across the street, and took out the metal object she'd given me for a closer look.

It wasn't silver; it was platinum. Even sold to a fence for a quarter of it's worth—which is what someone in my position would have to do—it would bring *at least* two hundred dollars.

I leaned over the casket and looked down at the face of the dead man. He'd been about sixty-five or so, and from the looks of him, every one of those years had been a rugged one. There were a couple of ancient scars on his right cheek, and at some time or other in his life someone had carved off his left ear, flush against his head.

I brought the platinum case up so that it glinted in the candlelight a moment, for the benefit of the woman who might be watching from across the street, and then lowered my arm into the casket. When I withdrew my arm, I'd palmed the case, and a moment later I dropped it back into my pocket.

As they say, two hundred dollars is two hundred dollars.

When I came out on the street again, the woman was nowhere in sight. I turned right and resumed my walk toward the hotel and the meeting of the exiles' club. It had been a fine evening to begin with, and now, of course, it was even finer.

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I'd walked about two blocks when a big, open car drew up to the curb and sounded its horn.

It was Gus from Newark, one of the oldest expatriates in Rio. "Get in, Scholar," he said.

I got in beside him and he edged the car out into the traffic again. Gus was once the top arsonist in the U.S.A., one of those big, happy types who's always either laughing or just about to. Tonight, though, he wasn't even smiling.

"What's the matter, Gus?" I asked. "You look a little down in the mouth."

"I'll tell you something, Scholar," he said. "It's a good thing I don't believe in ghosts. Otherwise, I'd swear I just saw one."

"Oh? Where?"

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back there," he said. "Damn near made me wreck the car."

"Ghosts'll do that."

"It ain't funny."

"Who was this ghost supposed to be the ghost *of*?" I asked.

"A girl I knew forty years ago," Gus said. "I was just a punk then, just coming up in the rackets." He shook his head. "But it couldn't be. Hell, she hasn't been heard from in forty years."

"*Who* hasn't? Who're you talking about, Gus?"

"Sweet Alice. The most gorgeous redhead ever seen on the face of this earth."

"And you thought you saw her back there?"

"Yeah. Just like she'd look now, if she was still alive. Damn near as old as me, but still beautiful. I tell you, Scholar, it gave me a hell of a jolt. I ain't over it yet."

"Why didn't you stop the car and see for sure?"

"You think I didn't? But by the time I could find a place to park and get back to where I'd seen her, she was gone. She must've got in a cab or something."

Gus was looking glummer by the second, and every once in a while a corner of his mouth would twitch, the way a man's will when he's doing a lot of thinking about something he'd rather not think about.

Neither of us said anything more until we'd reached the hotel and gone up to the private dining room where we hold our meetings. It's kind of an unusual room, because it's circular and it has this big round table in it. All the others were already there—Johnny the Knock and both the Charleys and Fig Lip and Slow Sue and Millie from Milwaukee and the Indian and Seldom Seen and Three Time George and all the rest. It was such a big turnout that some of the

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others had to crowd together a bit so that Gus and I could squeeze in.

It wasn't long before people began to notice how down in the mouth Gus looked.

"What's the long face for, Gus?" Frankie the Feeb called from the other side of the table. "You look all shook up—like maybe you just found out you burned down the wrong warehouse."

"If you was me, you'd look shook up, too," Gus said, and he went on to tell everybody at the table about Sweet Alice, just about the way he'd told it to me on our way over to the room in the car.

"That Sweet Alice must have been some female, for you to remember her all these years," Charley One said.

"You never saw anybody so gorgeous," Gus said. "Every man that met her fell in love with her. I even did, myself. She was what you call a fem—a fem . . ."

"Femme fatale," I said.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Femme fatale. That's what she was, all right—fatal. And there are five good men, dead forty years, to prove it. In fact, except for a lucky fluke, I'd've been dead right along with them." He shook his head sadly. "And all because of love. It's a dangerous thing, this love. All I got to say is, don't mess with it. Love is tougher than anybody."

"You mean this girl knocked off five men?" Millie from Milwaukee asked, amazed. "She killed five guys, and damn near killed you, too?"

"No, no," Gus said. "She didn't do it herself. Not personally. I meant she was the cause of it. Her, and the way everybody fell in love with her."

"And you say she hasn't been seen or heard from for forty years?" Slow Sue asked.

"That's right," Gus said. "And neither has Denver Eddie."

"Denver Eddie?" Fig Lip said. "I never heard of no Denver Eddie."

"It was all long before your time," Gus said. "Forty years ago ain't just yesterday, you know. This Denver Eddie was a hit man and a bomb specialist. Usually he'd work both together, if you know what I mean. A real handsome young guy, and never once got hit with this love, until he come up against Sweet Alice."

"Was he one of the guys that got killed?" Silent Knight asked.

"No," Gus said. "But maybe he'd of been better off if he had been."

"I never heard anything so romantic in my life," Millie from Milwaukee said. "Imagine! Five guys knocked off, and all out of love for the same girl!"

"I had a guy jump off a bridge on account of me once," Betty C. said. "He lived through it, though."

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"Shut up, Betty C.," Millie said. "Gus, this Sweet Alice is somebody I've got to hear about."

"You said it," Slow Sue said. "Let's have the story, Gus."

For a while, Gus just sat there, sort of frowning to himself, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to tell it or not. Then he shrugged a little, took a deep breath, and began.

"Not many of you have got any idea of how rough it was forty years ago," he said. "Especially in Chicago. I was with the Monk Homma gang then. There was six of us, including Monk, and for a small outfit we made out real good, considering the competition."

"It's this Sweet Alice we want to know about, Gus," Millie said.

"Well, she was Monk Homma's girlfriend. He had her set up in this real posh apartment and all, and if he spent a dime on her he spent a grand a week. He had this love, Monk did." He sighed. "And so what happens one day but that Monk finds out she ain't true. He went to her apartment one afternoon when she was away visiting her sister in Detroit, see, and he found this tie clip on the floor in the bedroom. It was one of half a dozen he'd had made up special, as gifts for the boys in his gang and himself. He had a real sense of humor, Monk did. He had them made out of heavy gold wire, in the outline of long, narrow coffins. *Skinny* coffins, we called them. And so, when he found this one in Sweet Alice's bedroom, he knew she'd been two-timing him with one of his own boys."

"But he didn't have any idea which one?" the Indian asked.

"No. But he figured a way to find out. He went over to the Western Union office and sent the same telegram to all five of them, signing it 'Alice,' and telling each guy she'd just got back from Detroit and wanted him to come to her apartment at once on a matter of life or death. None of us was even supposed to know he was keeping her in an apartment, you see, much less know where the apartment was. So whoever showed up would be the guy that'd been double-timing him with Alice. After he'd sent the telegrams, he went back to the apartment, checked his gun to make sure he had a full load, and sat down to wait to see who would rise to the bait."

"And who did?" Willie the Weep asked.

Gus sighed. "I did," he said. "When I walked in there and saw Monk with that .38 in his hand, I figured I had maybe another five seconds to live, maybe less."

"How come he didn't kill you?" Charley Two asked.

"He wanted to read me off first," Gus said. "That's all that saved me. He was still at it when the door buzzer went off again. And damn if it wasn't another of the boys in the gang. So then Monk had two guys to read off instead of just one." He paused. "Well, to make

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a long story short, what happened was that within the next ten minutes every guy in the gang had come to Sweet Alice's apartment. Monk had been expecting to trap one guy with those telegrams, but he'd trapped five."

"Wow!" Millie from Milwaukee said. "What a girl! Two-timing the boss-man with his entire gang! I mean, how romantic can you get? What happened then, Gus?"

"Well, for a while it was just a question of who would be the first to start shooting. Everybody was so mad at everybody else that nobody could hardly talk. Then all at once we stopped being mad at each other and started being mad at Alice. After all, she'd made fools and laughingstocks out of every one of us."

"Men!" Betty C. snorted. "That's just the way their minds work, all right."

"Her doing us that way sort of united us, you might say," Gus said. "We talked it over, once we finally *could* talk, and we decided Sweet Alice had to go. But after we talked it over some more, we figured that spoiling her looks might be even better. That is, you take a beautiful woman like Alice and, say, cut off her ear—well, that's the kind of punishment that lasts a lifetime.

"And that's when we called in Denver Eddie, the good-looking young hit man and bomb specialist I was telling you about. We gave him a contract to go out to Detroit and bring back one of Sweet Alice's ears."

"Good Lord," Slow Sue said. "This is just like some olden-time romance in one of those foreign countries over there in Europe or somewhere."

"Anyhow," Gus went on, "we knew Denver Eddie wouldn't be able to throw in a ringer on us—not that we figured he'd try. Sweet Alice had these tiny little roses tattooed on her earlobes, you see. Red ones, very pretty, and maybe only a quarter of an inch across. They were real works of art. We'd know for sure whether or not it was Alice's ear that Denver Eddie brought back with him to prove he'd filled the contract."

"Did this Denver know Alice at the time?" Millie asked.

"No. He just took off for Detroit with his switchblade and one of those little bombs he always carried with him, just in case somebody wanted to make a spur-of-the-moment contract with him to blow somebody up. After he'd left, Monk and the rest of us ordered a case of booze and went to work trying to forget about this love we'd had for Sweet Alice."

"Oh, that poor girl," Millie said, her eyes bright. "Oh, that poor little thing."

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"Well, that's men for you," Betty C. said. "Send a maniac out to cut off a girl's ear, and then sit around getting boozed to the eyes."

"Denver Eddie was in luck when he got to Alice's sister's house," Gus said, "because the sister was away at the time."

Slow Sue leaned forward excitedly. "And then, Gus?"

"He took one look at Sweet Alice, and that was all for Denver Eddie. There he stood, with his switchblade in one pocket and his bomb in the other. Just one look at her, and he was a goner. It just shows what this love can do."

"But he had to cut off her ear anyhow, right?" Seldom Seen said. "A contract is a contract. If he didn't cut it off, you boys would have hunted him down and killed him, right?"

Gus nodded. "That's right," he said. "But he just couldn't do it. And he wasn't the only one that had the love. It was the same way with Sweet Alice. All it took with *her* was one look, too—love at first sight, just like it was with Denver."

A waiter came into the dining room with a tray of drinks, and I grabbed off what looked like a double Scotch. I figured I'd need it, because Gus's tale was beginning to show signs of turning into one of the saddest love stories of all time. I said to begin with how it is with me and sentiment, and how I'm such a sucker for a sad love story. It's a terrible weakness; I wish I weren't that way, but I just can't help it. I took a big gulp of the Scotch, and then another.

"What a spot to be in," Silent Knight said, after the waiter had left. "What'd Denver do? What'd *Alice* do?"

"They went in and sat down and talked about it," Gus said. "Denver told her why he was there, and how he was just as good as dead, because if he didn't come back with her ear, we'd run him down and kill him. He wasn't about to cut her ear off, you understand; he just wanted her to know the facts. And then Alice, who's got all this sudden love for Denver, says to go ahead and cut it off, she doesn't want him to get killed."

"What beautiful love!" Slow Sue said, all choked up.

"But Denver said absolutely not," Gus said. "He said he'd think of some way out. After a couple of hours, while they just sat there, holding on to each other like a couple of kids, he came up with the most fantastic idea you ever heard of. Only a crazy man would even have thought of it. Denver had very small ears for a man, see, and what he wanted to do was get one of them tattooed with a little rose, just like Alice's, and then lop it off and send it back to us boys in Chicago."

"Beautiful," Slow Sue said. "Just beautiful. Oh, how he must have loved her!"

"He loved her, all right," Gus said. "The first thing Alice knew, she

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was sitting in this tattoo parlor while the tattoo artist copied one of her little roses onto Denver Eddie's earlobe."

"It's the loveliest love story ever told," Millie said, dabbing at her eyes.

I hate to admit it, but I felt like doing the same thing myself. It can be embarrassing, being sentimental, believe me. I wouldn't have wanted to say anything just then, for fear my voice would crack.

"Then Denver puts Alice in a cab and rushes her back to the apartment," Gus went on. "He sets her down in the livingroom and tells her to stay put a minute, he's got a little business to attend to in the bedroom. But Alice knows what kind of business he means, and the second he closes the door she runs into the bathroom and takes one of the old straight razors, like they used in those days, and slices off an ear, just as clean and pretty as anybody could ask for."

"Oh!" Slow Sue said. "What love! What love!"

"Then Alice runs out into the livingroom with it and yells for Denver to come see what she's done," Gus said. "But she was too late. When Denver comes in, there's blood streaming down the side of his face and he's holding his ear in his hand."

"Oh, it's too much!" Slow Sue said. "It's so beautiful I can't stand it."

"It was too much for Alice and Denver, too," Gus said. "When they saw what each one had done for the other, and all the blood, and realized how much they loved each other, they fainted. Both of them, just like that." He paused. "The reason I know all this is that me and Monk and the other boys broke into the apartment just a few seconds after it happened."

"You what?" Frankie the Feeb said.

"We busted in," Gus said. "After we'd finished that case of booze, see, we got to wishing we hadn't sent Denver out to Detroit in the first place. We knew we'd made a mistake. We all still had this love for Alice, and we didn't want to have her looks ruined, and so we all got in Monk's car and hit out for Detroit as fast as we could go. As it turned out, we got to the apartment about half a minute too late."

Nobody said anything. It was so quiet you could almost hear the ice cubes melting in the drinks.

"And then?" somebody finally asked.

"All hell broke loose," Gus said. "We threw cold water in their faces to bring them to, and we used towels to stop the bleeding. When Denver Eddie came to, he thought the guys were there to kill him, and he jumped up and ran into the bedroom and held the door against them. I guess the delayed shock of cutting off his own ear and then seeing Alice with hers cut off must have snapped something in his brain. Anyway, that's what he did.

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"As for Alice, when she came around she grabbed up Denver's ear, and then her own, and ran out into the hall, with me right behind her. I caught her just outside the door, and a couple of seconds later there was this explosion back in the livingroom, where we'd just been. Blew a hole in the wall not three feet from where we were standing."

"Denver Eddie's bomb?" Three Time George asked.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Denver had gone completely out of his mind. What he'd done was open the bedroom door a crack and throw the bomb into the livingroom with Monk and all the others." He shook his head. "Killed them all. It probably took the morgue a week to sort out the pieces."

"What about Denver, Gus?" I asked.

"He went down the fire stairs, and that was the last anybody ever saw of him."

"And Sweet Alice?"

"I got her out of there fast. By the time the law got there, we were on our way to this croaker I knew, to have him take care of her ear. He gave her a local and sewed it back on again. And all the time he was working on her, she just sat there holding Denver's ear. She wouldn't let go of it for anything. Later, when I took her to a hotel, she told me all that'd happened with her and Denver.

"She said she'd find him again someday, no matter where he was. And she kept that ear in her hand the whole time; it was enough to make your skin crawl. I made her get into bed, and then I went down to a drugstore to get her some medicine the croaker wanted her to put on her ear. When I got back to the hotel room, she was gone. That was forty years ago, and I've never seen or heard from her since."

There was a long silence, now that we all saw Gus had finished. I sat looking down at my glass. I knew now what was in that thin platinum case in my pocket, and who the beautiful woman had been who asked me to put the case in the casket with the body of the man with the missing ear.

I also knew what I was going to do with that platinum case. His body would still be lying in state, of course; it'd be no problem at all.

I didn't say anything about what I was going to do. It's bad enough being such a sentimental slob, without having everybody riding you about it.

But you know something? When I glanced around the table, I realized I wasn't the only sentimental slob in Rio that night. It's hard to believe, but there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

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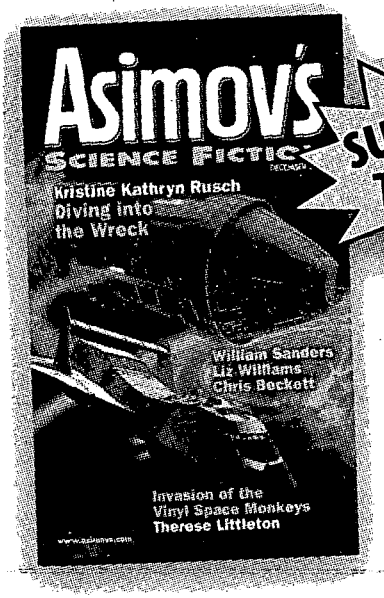


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# THE STORY THAT WON

**The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas.** Honorable mentions go to Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Ray Evans of Weston, Vermont; James A. Anderson of London, Ontario, Canada; Mark Haines of Frederick, Maryland; Randall Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Arthur P. Cosing, Jr., of Fairfax, Virginia; and James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan.

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## TAKEN!

### FRANK PEIRCE

I'm an avid follower of the Antiques Roadshow. Every Monday I go "Wow!" for those who are told that what they've brought is worth big bucks. They say, "I didn't know." "I'd never've guessed." Or "I almost threw it away." I bleed for those who've been deceived or who've cleaned up something, making it worth a fraction of what it was worth when crummy.

I go to yard sales, flea markets, and antique shops looking for finds.

Seeing a sucker, Al of Al's Antiques sicced his clerk on me.

Johnny said, "Don't let Al know I told you, kid, but those wooden heads in the window are worth a lot more than they're marked. I saw some just like them once in a book."

I took the money I'd been saving for a motorcycle and bought them. When the Roadshow came to St. Louis, mother drove me there from Illinois. After waiting in line for hours, I learned I'd been taken. Royally!

On the way home, I fumed over what I'd say to Johnny and Al. Watching me fume, mother said, "Think twice, son, before you call *them* crooks. You thought *you* were getting the better of Al." I chewed on that.

Calling Johnny aside, I said, "Thanks, good buddy. The appraiser said those heads are worth quadruple what I paid for them. I'd sell them for half that if I could find a buyer."

I did.

Al talked me into selling them back to him for double what I'd paid.



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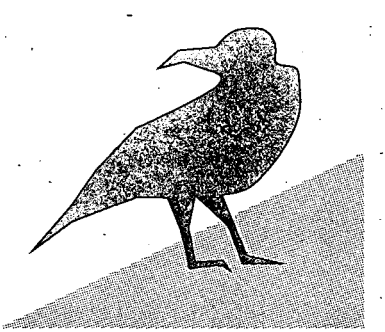

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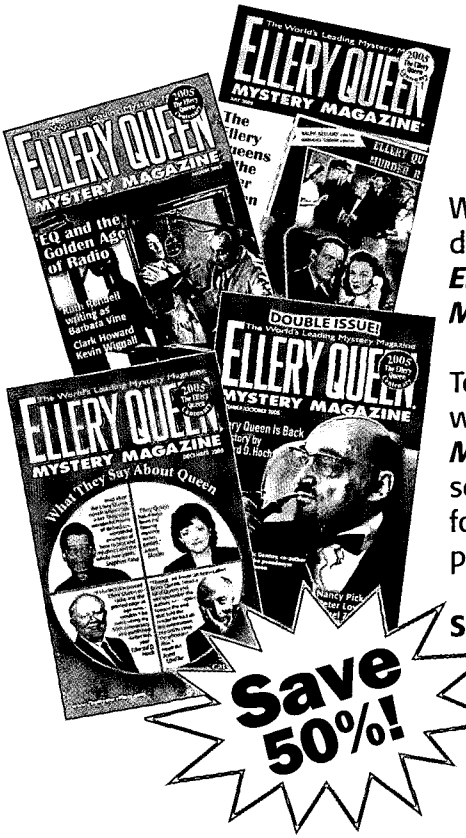


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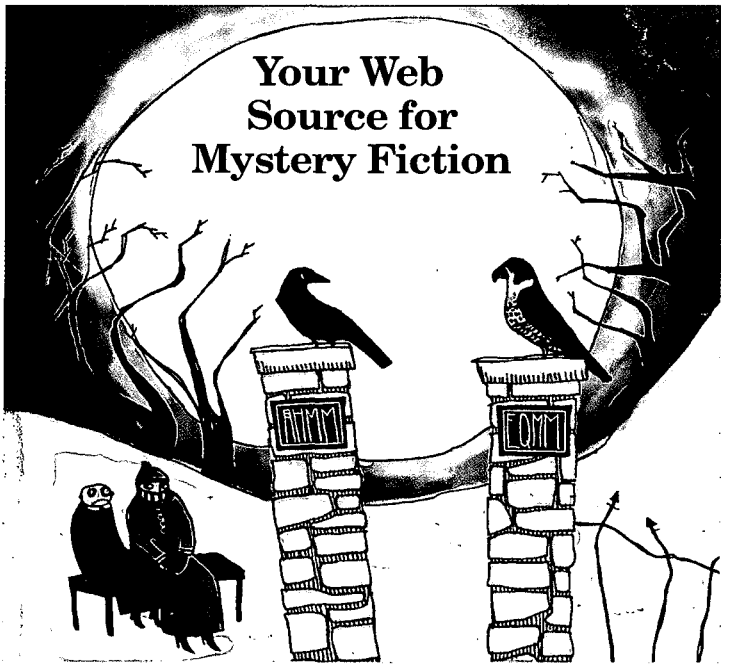


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